



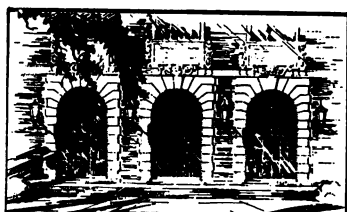
SISTER NATALIE

BY
MRS. CRAVEN



TRANSLATED BY

LADY GEORGIANA FULLERTON



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1880

MRS. AUGUSTUS CRAVEN

AUTHOR OF "A SISTER'S STORY"

TRANSLATED BY

LADY GEORGIANA FULLERTON

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I

"Ubi Charitas, ibi Deus"



LONDON

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1877

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To the Princess Sayn Wittgenstein,

BORN PRINCESS BARIATINSKY.

ACCEPT THE DEDICATION OF THESE PAGES
CONSECRATED TO THE SAINTLY MEMORY OF ONE
UNITED TO YOU BY THE
DOUBLE TIE OF A COMMON FAITH
AND A COMMON NATIONALITY.

YOU WERE THE FIRST TO ENCOURAGE ME TO WRITE THEM;
IT WAS IN YOUR HOME THAT I ACCOMPLISHED THE
GREATEST PORTION OF A TASK WHICH WILL
EVER BE ASSOCIATED IN MY MIND WITH
MONABRI; AND TO YOU, GRATEFULLY
AND AFFECTIONATELY, I NOW
MAKE AN OFFERING OF
MY WORK.

P. L. F. C.

*Monabri, Lausanne,
September 25th, 1876.*

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INTRODUCTION.

THE life of a Saint ought, as a rule, to be written by a Saint. It is not the first time that this thought has struck me; but I never felt more convinced of its truth, or more abashed by it, than in publishing the Life of Sister Natalie Narischkin. If I had only to record simple events, or to draw a picture vividly engraved on my remembrance, perhaps the task would not have exceeded my capacity. But to speak of a soul, and to relate its history from the time of its earliest impressions in childhood to the moment when it reached those heights where we can indeed contemplate but can no longer follow it, is difficult, and all but impossible, when the painter feels so immeasurably inferior to the model before him.

A Sister of Charity, if she is to be adequately depicted, should be described by one of her own companions. If the Order of St. Vincent of Paul suffered its daughters to use their pens, as did one of St. Francis of Sales' children when she wrote the lives of the first Mothers of the Visitation, we might indeed have possessed records worthy of those who would have been thus commemorated. But this was not to be. Above the care of cherishing holy recollections, above the advantage of perpetuating great examples, above even the desire of imitating the Church

in preserving the memory of departed Saints, the Order of St. Vincent prizes that spirit of deep humility which seeks and enjoins, and, as far as possible, insists on silence, if not on the general character and blessed results of the work of the Sisters of Charity, at any rate on their individual merits.

The *circulars*, which are sometimes printed as a record of some few of those devoted lives, are simple outlines of a picture which may remind those who have known the originals, of what they have themselves witnessed, but cannot convey to others any idea of it. And even if the case was different, these circulars are only read by members of the Order, and beyond this very restricted limit the Sisters neither seek, nor, with very rare exceptions, permit, any greater publicity.

One of these exceptions was made—in our days—with regard to a Sister of Charity, whose holy and admirable life was written by a biographer * fully worthy of such a task. In this case there was something quite exceptional both in the degree of notoriety which that wonderful life had acquired, and the reputation of him who undertook to write it.

The author of the “Life of the Sœur Rosalie” had not the same reasons as I have to say,

“Me digno à cio, ne io, ne altri crede.” †

I feel on this occasion peculiarly in need of the indulgence of the public—of that special public for whom this book is written. It will not interest persons entirely absorbed in politics, or who, if they wish for a moment to rest their thoughts from anxious pre-occupations, seek dis-

* The Vicomte de Melun.

† “Neither I, nor others, think me worthy of it.”—*Dante*.

traction only in fiction. It will suit those alone who like to refresh their minds with the contemplation of facts, real indeed, but of a different description from the events which convulse the world. They will indeed easily discern all the defects of this work ; but knowing as they do how seldom it is possible to individualize, so to speak, a Sister of Charity, and to relate her special history, they will thank me, perhaps, for having attempted it, and accept the result of my work without too severely criticizing it.

If any amongst them are, however, surprised that I have undertaken this difficult task, they will see, if they read this book, that the childhood and youth of Sister Natalie Narischkin was intimately connected with the dearest remembrances of my own life and a family history which has interested the public to a degree I could never have expected or foreseen. If at the time that I collected those reminiscences I had been able to give them a wider scope, the loved and venerated image of this dear friend would have been more conspicuously brought forward. As it is, she is mentioned in "A Sister's Story," and this gives me the right an artist claims, to select a figure in the back-ground of one of his own pictures, and reproducing it on another canvas to paint it more carefully, and exhibit its peculiar beauty.

As I have alluded to the "Sister's Story," I will add, in order to throw light on the beginning of this history, that I take it for granted that my readers are acquainted with that record.

And now, in case I have not entirely failed in my attempt, I must express my gratitude to those to whom I shall ascribe that result. First, and foremost, to the venerated Superiors of Sister Natalie, whose kindness authorized a work which could not have been undertaken without their sanction ; and then to her dear companions, who

with unwearied patience replied to all my questions, and facilitated my task by the loan of numerous and invaluable documents. Again, most particularly to her two sisters, the Baroness de Petz and Mdle. Catherine Narischkin, who by entrusting me with her letters, and permitting me largely to extract from them, gave to these pages a value which nothing else would have imparted to them. And finally, to the Viscountess des Cars, Sister Natalie's dearest friend, whose intelligent kindness and co-operation afforded me indispensable assistance.

May those who have thus helped me vouchsafe to pray that God may bless my work, and then, however weak may be the writer's hand, it will assuredly be blest.





SISTER NATALIE NARISCHKIN.

CHAPTER I.

1835—1841.

THOSE who have read “A Sister’s Story,” and who remember the pages which describe the short life and the holy death of Olga de la Ferronnays, have not, perhaps, forgotten that amongst the names uttered with the deepest tenderness by her dying lips were those of two young girls whose arrival she had hoped for and expected, but whom, as a last sacrifice, God ordained that she should not see again. Had one more hour of life been granted

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to her, the wish would have been fulfilled ; but this was not to be, and when her friends arrived they did not find her alive.

The youngest and, to Olga, the dearest of those friends was Natalie Narischkin, who, on her side, had been ardently desiring a meeting which did not take place until death made it a strangely sad and solemn one. In the height of her beauty and in the full bloom of health, she knelt by the bed on which Olga was lying crowned with white roses, and with the serene and exulting expression on her face which the departed soul had left behind it. Very long did Natalie remain by that mortuary couch, motionless and absorbed in prayer. She spent there the rest of the day, and a part of the night. Olga had intensely longed to speak to her before her

death; but now a more powerful voice than her own made her friend hear, during those silent hours, what she had not been able to say to her. More than once already had that Divine voice spoken to the young girl's heart in the midst of the world, but during her prolonged watch she heard it so distinctly that the impression it made on her mind was never obliterated. To her latest day she spoke with emotion of that night of prayer, as of the time when a special and decisive grace had descended on her soul.

Thirty years afterwards, when she had been already wearing, for twenty-five years, the habit of the daughters of St. Vincent of Paul, Natalie adverted to the recollections of that night in a way which those who heard it can never forget, and with that heavenly expression of counten-

ance which was peculiar to her. Those who knew Sister Natalie only during the latter part of her life, looked upon this expression as the natural result—the effect, as it were—of an existence so long devoted to an heroic love of God, and of the poor; but her face had, even in childhood, been always remarkable for this particular look of openness and firmness, of sweetness and of energy; for a sort of serene gravity strange at such an age, and stranger still when she was old enough to mix in society. It was with the white *cornette* of a Sister of Charity that this angel-like countenance harmonized. We might almost say that it accounted for it.

Natalie Narischkin was born at St. Petersburg, on the 6th of May, 1820. She was the daughter of M. Gregoire Narischkin and the Princess Anne Mest-

chersky. They had been obliged, for the sake of health, to leave their home and to spend many years in Italy with their children—one son and four daughters. Natalie was the third of these daughters. Brought up far from their native land, they had no early recollections of Russia, where their family, nevertheless, occupied a high and important position. Peter the Great's mother was related to them; and in a country where titles are highly prized and lavishly bestowed, the Narischkins have always declined any such addition to their name, considering it sufficiently illustrious to dispense with it.

I had often seen Natalie and her sisters in their childhood, but the first distinct recollection I have of her was at Naples in the month of June, 1835. She was then fifteen, and in deep mourning for her

grandfather, who had died at Sorrento a few weeks before. She came to spend a whole day with my sister Olga, who was exactly of the same age. I was struck by her appearance, and by the sweet and peculiarly serious expression of her face, in keeping indeed with her deep mourning, but still somewhat singular in so young a girl. I see her now before my eyes as she stood that day in the bright sunshine of Naples, dressed all in black, with her pale and clear complexion, her large blue eyes, her fair hair divided in thick plaits, and that peculiar charm in her glance, her smile, and her whole manner, which would have made it impossible for any one not to notice her; and noticing her, not to wonder who she was, what were her thoughts, and what was to be her future fate. At that time the

friendship between her and Olga was useful to both of them; they had the same pious inclinations, the same purity of heart, the same attraction towards goodness, and they mutually encouraged each other in following it—though they had not then, and never had on earth, the happiness of being united in the same faith.

Soon after this first meeting they were separated, and did not meet again for five years; the melancholy and important events which happened during that time in Olga's family casting a sadness over her young life, but at the same time shedding light on her soul, reacted to some degree on her friend. Alexandrine's conversion, the death of Albert, the years spent at Boury—had all tended to deepen the piety of one of these young girls, and in a measure influenced them both.

Natalie, with her sisters, was beginning to mix in society. She was much admired, and the world surrounded her with its attractions; but Olga still remained her dearest friend. She had been made acquainted with all the feelings of her heart during that long absence; she had shared the anxieties of Albert and Alexandrine's journey, and then the anguish that followed their return to Paris. Olga's letters had revealed to her every detail of that way of sorrows, which these girls of sixteen were not old enough, perhaps, fully to appreciate; but which, nevertheless, made a lasting impression on their young minds.

Neither Olga nor Natalie were meant to live in the world: God was preparing them for Himself alone. Olga was the earliest endowed with supernatural strength, doubtless because her time on earth was to

be short; and the energy she derived from a premature familiarity with grief was useful, not only to her own soul, but also to Natalie's, which was one day to rise still higher than her own, and to reach those summits which none can attain unless the voice of God Himself calls them to such heights.

After a separation of five years the two friends met at Naples towards the end of the year 1839. They were then nineteen. This was, for Olga, the greatest of the pleasures she enjoyed during the only days in which she joined in worldly amusements. This moment of her life was like an hour of sunshine between two storms: the first had saddened the last days of her childhood; the second, a still darker one, was about to throw a gloom over those of her youth, and to prepare her to arrive

rapidly at the only real end of life and happiness.

It was a longer and more arduous path that was to lead Natalie to the goal they have both of them now arrived at. But for her also, life was to be severed in its early bloom from a world renounced as entirely by one final sacrifice as if death had set its seal on that separation.

It is difficult, in looking back to the time we are speaking of, not to be struck by the contrast between the transient frivolity of those days of earthly dissipation, and the future which was in store for both these girls; and yet, is there any destiny to which this thought does not in some measure apply? Is there any life which is not brief? or any fate which is not fraught with the deepest importance? It is only our unaccountable and universal

folly which blinds us to these truths, and makes us often so ill apply the words, "pleasure and sorrow," "joy and grief," "life and death."

To call those happy who forget God in the world, and to pity those who forsake it for His sake; to speak of those who are about to die as the living, and number amongst the dead those in possession of eternal life; is it not, as Bossuet says, "to speak a barbarous foreign tongue, and to forget the language of our true home."

We all, more or less, use that alien form of speech. It is well we should be aware of it; for, in order to learn the true language of our heavenly Home, it is necessary, as in every other study, that we should be conscious of our own ignorance. Such being the case, it would be with more regret than pleasure that my memory

would dwell on those days, in appearance so full of brightness, if it was not that I find, at every step, a number of remembrances which link that time of youthful dissipation with the earnest sequel which was to follow.

It is always cheering to see God's merciful dealings with pure hearts and upright intentions, even when those hearts are, for a while, too much engrossed with the frivolities of life. It seems as if His Hand, like that of a loving Father, was extended over the child whom He guides and restrains.

Of the two friends, it was Natalie for whom the world was preparing its most dangerous snares; she who was, one day, so energetically to renounce it. Olga only participated for a short time in these worldly amusements, whereas Natalie was,

for years, exposed to the temptations they present. Olga was also strengthened by all the graces which a fervent first communion imparts to the soul. Recent and solemn events had added their effects to the impressions which four years spent with Alexandrine had made on her mind. Natalie, on the contrary, though her childhood was not free from trials, had not as yet undergone any such sobering influences. Her father's uncertain health, and, later on, her mother's declining state, had indeed somewhat saddened her home. But in early youth this sort of depressing atmosphere, instead of producing the salutary effects often caused by sudden and startling events, generally tends to provoke a feeling of weariness rather than of seriousness, and a desire to shake off this depression by distractions.

Nor does the Greek Church afford her children that blessed starting-point which those of the Catholic Church find on the threshold of life. Natalie entered the world protected only by her perfect purity of heart and the invisible grace of God, but without any of the help which youth derives from submission to authority. And yet at this, the most worldly time of her life, some one who saw her in a ball-room could not refrain from saying, "Really that girl looks as if she had just made her first Communion." This remark—which was often reiterated by others—illustrates what I have already said of the peculiar expression of her countenance. She was dressed that day like her companions; nor did her thoughts, perhaps, differ from theirs. Nothing in her, or about her, betokened her future destiny, and yet it seemed as if

that unknown future was already surrounding her with a strange halo.

Balls and parties and worldly amusements were not, however, even at that time, her only, or greatest, enjoyment. The happiest of her evenings were those when her sisters and herself were allowed to invite to their mother's house some of their most intimate friends. Olga and her young sister were always of that number, and used to obtain leave from their parents to join these girlish parties, on condition that they returned at once when sent for.

One day Olga transgressed this rule, and displeased her parents by a delay which had made them anxious. She wrote in her Journal, "I have had to-day a sorrow and a great joy: sorrow, because my father was annoyed at my having remained so late last night at the Narischkins,

which made mamma say that it frightened her to see how I am always carried away by the pleasure of the moment;" as for her joy, it arose from a circumstance that would not, perhaps, have given such intense delight to many girls.

A letter written by Father Lacordaire had made a great impression on a set of young men, amongst whom was one of Olga's brothers and another friend of the Narischkins. "At first," she goes on to relate in her Journal, "they began by joking, but by degrees every one became serious, and we heard from F—— that they had all made good resolutions. This morning Natalie wrote to me that R—— had told her that he had said his prayers yesterday for the first time since October. Oh what a happiness this is! I feel I should be so much happier and better if everybody was good."

The friend here alluded to seemed likely at that time to play an important part in Natalie's life. He admired and liked her, and their friends—not unnaturally—supposed that they were likely to be married. This was often the case with her. The feelings inspired by her remarkable attractions, and her own tenderness of heart, seemed likely to lead to some mutual attachment and early marriage. Several plans of this sort were thought of, but some circumstance or other always intervened to prevent their accomplishment, until the day came when a supreme and Divine obstacle arose—that one obstacle which no earthly changes can affect, or overcome.

It is interesting to observe how high the key-note, so to speak, of the hearts of these young girls was tuned, even in the

midst of a gay life. The salvation of a soul was even then, in their eyes, the most important of all objects; to such a degree that the joy of hearing that one estranged from God had felt faith and fervour re-awakening in his heart, had been enough to stamp that day of their lives with a holy and peculiar joy.

When a human soul has found its way to God, either by an early death or a complete consecration of itself to Him, we like to notice many trifling facts, till then unheeded, which show the Eye and Hand of Providence watching over and guiding those He has chosen for His own, even whilst their lives are still imperfect, and the world surrounding them with circumstances apparently most foreign to their vocation.

Natalie, born in the Greek Church, but

transplanted, so to speak, into a land far distant from her native country, had no opportunity of observing its peculiarly local and national form of worship; and severed also from the practice of the religion prevalent in the one where her childhood and youth were spent, she might easily have grown up in a state of indifference, or at any rate of carelessness, which even in the midst of religious influences is too often the case in youth. But not so with Natalie. From her earliest years she turned instinctively towards everything that tended to raise the mind upward. It seemed as if a Divine voice was ever sounding in her ears and commanding her attention, and that God never allowed her to remain deaf to it.

Her parents had indeed given her pious examples and instructions; but what I

allude to are the germs of heroism in virtue existing in her soul, which by means of apparently accidental—but, as they turned out, providential—circumstances developed and expanded, till at last they arrived at full maturity. For instance, after Olga had left Naples in 1835, Natalie returned to Sorrento, and after parting with her first and dearest friend, made acquaintance with a family—that of the Baron de Massa—who inhabited a villa close to the one where she was staying. She found in her new playmates not only the simple childish piety which she had admired in Olga, but the zeal of young apostles unrestrained by any of the prudential considerations which influence older people; and, full of the ardour of Italian faith, they did not hesitate to adjure her to become a Catholic, and to add to their entreaties all

the arguments furnished by their early knowledge of the great truths of religion.

The parents on both sides put a stop to these religious discussions; but if heroism is contagious and can be unconsciously imbibed, we may venture to suppose that it was through her intimacy with these Catholic children that Natalie caught its first symptoms—for, later on, five of these boys became Jesuits, devoted themselves to the foreign missions, and were sent to China. One of them—Father Gaëtano Massa—had the happiness, in returning to Europe, to find the companion of his childhood clad in the habit of the Daughters of St. Vincent of Paul. He went back afterwards to China, and died a martyr at the time of the attack on the College of Zi-ha-va.

We may add that in her widowhood

the mother of this heroic missionary entered the Convent of the Visitation in Naples, and that her youngest daughter, whose affianced husband had died on the eve of their nuptials, consecrated her life to God in the same Religious House.

Such friends, as these had no doubt contributed to fan the latent fire in Natalie's heart. And when she was no longer a child, and mixed with the world, other useful and valued friendships were not wanting to her. Besides Olga and Albertine de la Ferronnays, another girl, younger than herself, had a considerable and lasting influence over Natalie. Alexandrine Lebzeltern's cultivated mind, her deep piety, and perfect simplicity of character, made her fully worthy of such a friendship; and their intimacy was all the greater on account of the connection

of the Austrian Minister's daughter with Russia. Her mother belonged to a Russian family. Neither of these young persons had ever been in France, and yet they were both intended by Providence to become in some sense French, and both of them to bear in that country honoured names,—Alexandrine Lebzeltern by marrying into one of the noblest families in France,* and Natalie, by the adoption of a title of a higher sort—that of a daughter of St. Vincent of Paul—one of the most glorious a woman can bear, though pride is for ever forbidden to those who assume it.

In after life, living as they did in the same land, united in the same faith and in the strictest bonds of friendship, they saw as much of each other as their different

* Mademoiselle de Lebzeltern married the Vicomte Des Cars.

positions permitted. Death alone severed that devoted friendship. It is to this friend's assistance that I look in the performance of a work which she would have accomplished more easily and more perfectly than myself.

The two young girls were living at that time in the midst of many older persons who belonged to the same set, and were subsequently more or less associated with Natalie's existence. Three sisters, the Mesd^{elles} Fontin, French in name but Russians by birth, reckoned amongst the most intimate friends of both their families. The premature death of one of them, in 1837, decided the complete retirement from the world of the two others. They lived together and devoted themselves from that time to God, to the poor, and to their friends. Like true Sisters of Charity in

the world, they spent at Naples thirty-five years, as other people spend one day, in a continual succession of good works. One of them died two years ago, leaving behind her an honoured and beloved memory; the last of these attached sisters still pursues her way on earth—that road brightened by faith, an ever-increasing charity, and a calm and secure hope. She is not a stranger to the story of Natalie's life, for she loved her when a child. She followed, with the deepest sympathy, the course of her holy life; and now she follows, with her prayer, the sainted soul of her young friend into that Eternity where she has preceded her.

There was again another set of sisters which a variety of circumstances both then and later on brought into intimate relations with Natalie. These were the Miss

Frasers. Their family was originally Scotch, and had settled in Austria at the time when English Catholics were often obliged to seek abroad the free exercise of their religion. A long-standing intimacy had existed between them and the Lebzeltens, and one of the sisters of the Count adopted, as it were, the daughters of the English exiles. One of them, named Miana, became one of Natalie's dearest friends. The eldest sister was married to Count Henri de Bombelles ;* the youngest,

* May it be allowed to the translator of this biography to mention here that it was the Comtesse Henri de Bombelles who lent her the first book which awoke in her mind earnest religious impressions, and laid in her soul the seeds of conversion to the Catholic Faith. One evening, in the year 1835, in a villa near Turin, the residence of the Austrian Minister, Madame de Bombelles observed that the young Protestant Englishwoman, then her guest, was looking into the pages of St. Francis de Sales' "Introduction to a Devout Life," and she quietly said, "Would you like to take

Margaret, — or, as she was habitually called, Mita—married a high-born and accomplished Sicilian, the Marquis Gargallo.

It would take up too much time to enumerate all those whose friendship and whose example surrounded Natalie's childhood and youth with associations which influenced her whole future life. We shall have occasion to allude to them later on in this history.

But we cannot omit mentioning a circumstance which she always said herself

that book home with you?" The offer was eagerly accepted, and the night spent in reading the volume which all but converted King James I. It did its work in the soul to which it was thus casually presented. Many years elapsed before impressions grew into convictions, and subsequently became faith; but to the loan of that book, and to what she saw and heard in that pious home and its little chapel, the writer of these lines attributes the first dawns of the grace which led her, eleven years afterwards, into the Catholic Church.

had made a deep impression upon her. This was the return to Naples of Alexandrine, Comtesse Albert de la Ferronnays, who had then been for four years a widow. Natalie had seen her five years before, embarking for the East, in the full tide of a happiness which, if sometimes clouded by anxiety, was not yet darkened by it. Now she met her again, clad in those weeds which she never was to doff, and completely severed from the world. She witnessed the perfect serenity which resulted from her possession of the true faith, purchased at the cost of her whole earthly happiness, and, as she deemed, not too dearly bought at that price. To look at her was, in itself, a lesson which, if not fully understood by Natalie, still made a deep impression upon her. And at that time the Abbé Gerbet was also at Naples

and spent there that winter of 1840 under the roof of Olga's parents.

Natalie was often present at conversations which left an indelible impression on the minds of all those who took part in them. The spirit of holiness and the charm of genius influenced their tone. Subjects were viewed in a new light. Even merriment was mingled with something useful and improving. It seemed as if souls expanded and hearts were lightened by the purer atmosphere, higher than earth and nearer to heaven, where they were unconsciously raised. Natalie carried with her, even into the cloister, the remembrance of those hours of virtuous social intercourse; and even now they deter from the vain and insipid converse of the world, those who have for long years preserved their precious memory.

Kneeling between Alexandrine and Olga in the churches where her mother never objected to her accompanying them, Natalie used to see them, with envy, go up to the Altar to receive Holy Communion. This seemed alone to awaken her to the sense of the separation between herself and the friends whose faith she felt so completely to share. The barrier between the Greeks and the Catholics seemed almost imperceptible in the eyes of a young girl, till a real, tangible privation brought it before her, and renewed that winter—and this time with unconquerable force—the thoughts and desires she had felt years before at Sorrento.

The following letter, written in answer to the announcement of the sudden and premature death of a young man belonging

to the Neapolitan Society, gives an idea of the tendency of her mind at that time :

“ Your letter, which I received this morning, gave me both grief and pleasure. I did not know any more than you did all his virtues ; but as he made no display of them, and yet was full of faith, piety, and charity, he could die in peace and happiness. He has received his reward. . . . Oh yes, he is now happy ! and each time that the thought of his death brings tears into my eyes, I look up to Heaven, and I feel as if I saw him there. I think of his actual bliss and of the infinite mercy of our Saviour who redeemed him with His Blood. We have in him a friend who prays for us, I am sure. Good-bye. I do not feel able to write more at present. Do not give way to sorrow. After all, it has been

God's will ; we must submit ours to His, and not only submit, but adore that Divine Will, for God is so good, and loves us so much more than we can love ourselves, that He never allows anything to happen that is not for our good. . . . It may so happen that this death, which grieves us so much, will be a source of blessing to others. It is possible that it is the means God employs to touch the heart of some poor sinner, to convert and lead him back to the heavenly road, and would not that be the greatest of all happinesses ? He is in heaven. Some friend of his, struck by the thought of his premature death, is now perhaps praying more fervently for the salvation of his own soul ; and will, in consequence, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the only thing we must all covet.

“ NATALIE.”

These words seem strange ones for a young girl apparently plunged in worldly pleasures. The tone of this letter betrays a spirit which every successive step of her life was more conspicuously to evince.





CHAPTER II.

1841.

IN the spring of the year 1841 Olga left Naples with her mother, to go to Goritz, the residence of the exiled royal family of France. The two friends parted with the full expectation of soon meeting again. Madame Narischkin meant to go to Paris in the course of the year; Olga and her family were also to return there, and with this in view it was with smiles that they took leave of each other; and without the slightest presentiment of the sad and solemn circumstances which were to attend their next

meeting. A few days before her departure, Olga wrote in her Journal :

“Easter Sunday, April 19th, 1841.

“I have spent a very happy day ! This morning we all received Communion together. Then we came home to breakfast, and went afterwards to Mass in the King’s Chapel. Natalie came with us. During Mass I felt a happiness I had not known for a long time. The festival of to-day filled me with excessive joy. If I could have written at that moment, I think I should have been inspired. At first I was excited, but afterwards quite calm. ‘God is very good, that is all I can say !’”

The friend kneeling by her side was doubtless prayed for in those hours of fervent devotion on this happy Easter-day. But what were Natalie’s own thoughts

then? Was the light shining even then behind the mist which so often veils the dawn of a bright day?—that light of truth and love which was one day to illuminate her mind; to burn and consume her soul. Perhaps it did shine then like a feeble and vacillating gleam; but what we are certain of is, that, feeble as it may have been, she followed it with a wonderful fidelity; and never from the moment that it dawned upon her, up to the time when it kindled in her soul a Divine fire, did she for a single day close her eyes to it. She paused indeed—she hesitated sometimes—she never turned back. Long before she could clearly define what she was seeking, it was God alone she was striving for.

Everything in her soul was in confusion, and little was apparent on the surface. Those who loved her best did not always

understand her. Perhaps she scarcely understood herself in those days; but a firm, simple, faithful, pure intention, fed—like oil feeds a lamp—that hidden flame, and preserved it from ever going out.

Towards the end of the year 1840, Madame Narischkin left Naples, with her daughters, to go to Paris. They stopped on their way at Nice, and remained there some time. There, as elsewhere, Providence brought Natalie into contact with friends singularly well adapted to favour and advance her growing convictions.

Amongst their greatest friends at Naples none had been more intimate with the Narischkin family than the Count and Countess Xavier de Maistre. Madame de Maistre was a Russian, and related to them. Her house was the one which the three sisters most habitually frequented, and as

their mother was often unable on account of her health to take them out herself, it was under the Countess's chaperonage that they generally went into society.

The salon of the Count and Countess de Maistre was one of the pleasantest at Naples. Their home life was singularly bright and agreeable. His kindliness, and the playful simplicity of his manner, as well as his cleverness and talent, lent it a peculiar charm. Although Count Xavier de Maistre's reputation was inferior to that of his illustrious brother, he was celebrated as an author. His modesty and his indifference to his own literary fame were such, that several years after the publication of the "*Voyage autour de ma Chambre*" and the "*Lépreux de la Cité D'Aoste*," he was quite surprised on arriving in Paris to find

those works famous and in everybody's hands.

He never really cared about literary renown, and perhaps hardly gave to letters the time and thought which his abilities called for. His freedom from vanity was such, that success in that line afforded him no pleasure; and though his merit as a painter—fair as it was—did not approach to his talent for writing, he decidedly preferred using his brush to his pen. The hours he spent in painting were the happiest in his life; for this occupation was in complete harmony with his passionate love of the beauties of nature, and the intense delight it gave him, after long years spent in the north of Europe, to dwell under the bright Italian sky and in the midst of the enchanting scenery of Naples. It was im-

possible to be more agreeable, more lovable, more kind to others than Count Xavier de Maistre; but there was in him none of the deep, penetrating, all but prophetic inspiration, the genius, and the eloquence of the great Joseph de Maistre. Although he was a religious man and a pious Catholic, he possessed none of the rough energy of his brother's faith, none of the ardour of his zeal, or of that vehement and powerful controversial spirit, which if it often awakened opposition, never left room for indifference. Nothing of the sort existed in Count Xavier de Maistre's amiable and peaceable nature. His wife, also a good and amiable woman, was a member of the Greek Church, and somewhat imbued with prejudices against Catholicism. Conversation on religious subjects would have easily led to discussion, and he maintained a silence as to

such topics conducive to domestic peace, which he perhaps esteemed more highly than the interests of truth.

It was not, therefore, in their house that Natalie was subjected to influences bearing on the religious direction of her future life; but it was owing to these friends that she made acquaintance with the family of Count Rodolph de Maistre, Governor of Nice, and son of Count Joseph de Maistre, whose society and example made a lasting impression upon her, and matured the serious thoughts which even in the midst of the gaities of Naples had forced themselves on her mind. The ardent and earnest natures, the stores of information, the intense faith and zeal—all hereditary gifts—with which her new acquaintances were endowed, enabled them to enter into controversy in a way from

which Olga would have shrunk, though she had inspired her friend with the desire of fathoming them. A great intimacy was rapidly formed between Natalie and the daughters of the Count de Maistre. One of them, the Marchesa Fassati, confirms—in a letter recently written—what I have already said as to the peculiarity of the young Russian girl's manner and countenance at that time of her life.

“I was struck,” she says, “with the modest look of recollection which was so remarkable in her, even in a ball-room. Often in the midst of the parties at my father's house, she and my sister used to steal out of the crowded rooms and withdraw for a few minutes of prayer in the chapel. . . . Her image has always remained impressed in my mind as a type of purity, simplicity, and humility.”

Does not this description tally exactly with the impression she made on those who saw her in the ball-rooms of Naples? She always seemed to be listening to an interior voice that made her as indifferent to the praises, as, later on, she was to the criticisms, of the world. There was something about her which reminded one of Dante's Beatrice,* whom the poet shows us clothed with humility, and pursuing her way careless of the praises addressed to her, and looking as if she belonged rather to heaven than to earth.

By the time Madame Narischkin and her daughter arrived in Paris, Natalie knew that Olga would not be there. Since

* *Ella, s'en va sentendosi lodare
Benignamente d'umiltà vestuta,
E pur che sia una cosa venuta,
Dal cielo in terra, a miracol mostrare.*

they had parted at Naples, many sad events and apprehensions of impending sorrows had changed all the plans of her family. After spending the winter and the summer of 1841 in the North of Italy, the La Ferronnays all returned to Rome at the beginning of 1842, and Eugénie, Comtesse de Mun,* accompanied them in this journey.

About the same time Natalie and her sisters arrived in Paris, where Providence seemed to have purposely provided them with friends whom they had known at Naples and in Italy, who were to carry on the work which, at Naples, the La Ferronnays had begun, and at Nice the De Maistres had continued. The invisible hand that was guiding Natalie did not leave her exposed without defence to the

* Mother of Count Albert de Mun.

brilliant and dazzling impressions which Paris is wont to make on strangers who only witness its exterior aspect. At the house of the Duke of Serra-Capriola, at that time Neapolitan Ambassador in France, the young Russians were welcomed — warmly welcomed — by the Duchess, his wife, and almost like sisters by his daughters. Without any preconcerted plan—almost, unconsciously—the young people of both families grew into the habit of spending the mornings together, and meeting at the same place every evening.

Strongly as Madame Narischkin opposed later on her daughter's change of religion, it must be admitted that at that time she objected to none of the proceedings which must, nevertheless, have tended to increase her desire for it. At Paris, even more than at Naples, she allowed her and

her sisters to accompany their friends to churches and to convents as often as they liked. They were, according to their different ages and characters, more or less influenced by what they saw. On Natalie and Catherine the impressions thus produced were deeper still than they had been in Italy, or at Nice.

A religious movement was then going on in Paris, not unlike the one we are actually witnessing. It prepared in fact the results we now behold. It has not, however, pleased God to grant to the present epoch the wonderful preachers who roused the Catholic spirit of France, in the days I speak of. Since the eloquent voices of Lacordaire and Ravignan have been hushed in death, none of equal strength and power have been heard amongst us. There were laymen also at that time, men of genius

and of faith—noble and generous hearts, unsurpassed by any of their successors in the path they opened—who mercilessly attacked in their stronghold, infidelity, indifference, and cynical unbelief. A spirit of fervour and zeal seemed to pervade the very air, and whilst the historical reminiscences of the Church were exciting a new interest, and eloquent pens revived those half-forgotten memories, the monuments of its former greatness were raised from their ruins, and becoming objects of reverence to the French people. Magnificent works of charity were revived, or originated; and all we now see flourishing and increasing in every direction was then starting into life with an energy, a strength, a holy impetuosity, which cannot be forgotten by those who shared the emotions of that revival. Then, as ever, Paris was

that strange place which contains two such opposite elements in its bosom,—two such different cities, that strangers not acquainted with both can, according to the sphere in which their lot is cast, with equal truth declare: one, that in the whole world there does not exist a more dissipated, perverse, insane, and boldly wicked town; and another, that nowhere can there be found one more devout, more exemplary, more exceptionally pious, or more actively charitable.

It was this last Paris that Natalie and Catherine Narischkin, under the guidance of the mother of their Neapolitan friends, learnt to know and appreciate. This knowledge proved a most essential antidote to the pleasures of society, which they still frequented. But already Natalie was not the same person as at Naples. We have

seen her at Nice, leaving the ball-room to pray in the silent chapel. She was beginning, more and more, to experience that yearning for seclusion which is one of the first manifestations of God's designs on a soul to whom He says, He will call her into solitude, and there speak to her heart. Her only delight was to be in churches, and still more in the convents which she was wont to visit with the Duchess de Serra-Capriola and her daughters.

One day they took her to the central Mother House of the Sisters of Charity in the Rue de Bac, that house where she was to spend so many years of her existence; where she was to learn the meaning, and find the satisfaction, of all those deep longings which already filled her soul. This was an important epoch in her life.

Often and often she returned to it.

No other church in Paris attracted her as much as the chapel of that immense Religious House; the chapel where, a short time before, that wonderful vision had been vouchsafed of which we all wear the commemorative medal, and which suggested the prayer which, since then, has been familiar to the lips of every Catholic, and daily repeated throughout the world: "Hail, Mary, conceived without sin."

The humble Sister chosen to be the recipient and the messenger of that Divine communication was still alive at the time we are writing of; but no one knew, or will ever know, her name. Nothing distinguished her from the multitude of her companions, and whilst the pious devotion which was to be the safeguard and salvation of so many souls, was fast spreading in the Church of all lands, she remained

concealed like one of those sweet flowers hidden from sight by a thick foliage, but filling the air with its delicious perfume.

Natalie listened with the deepest interest to these details, and it seemed to her that for the first time she understood what is meant by humility, in the full sense attached to that word by the teaching of the Church, and the practice of the Saints. She perceived that it was quite distinct from the purely human virtue of modesty, not seldom assumed as a mask, and under favour of which praises are rejected with the sole object of obtaining credit for additional virtue. Those who are really humble are unconscious of it; and others should abstain even from alluding to the beauty of what they see in a soul of this sort, lest the breath of their praise should sully that delicate quality

and make it vanish. Of all the virtues which constitute Christian perfection, it is, generally speaking, the one most seldom appreciated and understood outside the Catholic Church. Heresy and schism have a natural tendency to nurture pride; the highest token of sincerity, the most certain sign of grace, is to love humility, or even to comprehend its real meaning.

Natalie, who was to prove so wonderful an example of this virtue, had the holy seed of it in her soul. Instead of being repulsed, or astonished, or disgusted with what she saw in this Religious Community—as is often the case with those outside the Church, and sometimes even with Catholics, who if they observe the precepts do not follow the counsels of their religion—she was instantly struck with admiration, and

deeply and silently meditated on its import. She sought to obtain information from the Sisters, especially from the venerable Sister Barba, who was her first friend in that house. She liked to talk to Father Aladel, a pious Lazarist missionary. He it was who told her the history of the vision which had been seen in the chapel of the convent. Natalie kept these things in her heart, and pondered over them during the long hours she spent on her knees in the sanctuary where that Holy Mother had appeared whom she had loved from her childhood, and loved more and more as the desire to draw near her, and grow like her, increased in her soul.

This apparition of the Blessed Virgin was the first of those which have taken place in France, in this century. Twice again since, still more humble Apostles

have revealed to us similar manifestations, the reality of which seems evinced by the wonderful fruits of grace they produce. Faith and fervour have been, and daily continue to be, rekindled in the hearts of those who seek the spots sanctified by those sacred visions; and multitudes from every part of the world visit the obscure and remote localities which have now become famous sanctuaries.

We own that it is a complete mystery to us that persons who firmly believe in the Christian religion, should scout and deride our pious and reasonable admittance of the possibility and the reality of such occurrences. Can they venture to assert that it is *impossible* that our Blessed Lord, His Mother, and His Saints should ever revisit this world of ours? Can they point to a single text in the Scriptures

which predicts the day and the hour when miracles were to cease? If they cannot do so, they must content themselves with disputing the proofs of the particular facts in question, a liberty which we entirely concede to them. But strong must be the counter-evidence, if it is to convict of insanity, or of falsehood, all the holy persons who testify to the truth of these miraculous occurrences, and to condemn the pilgrimages which result from that belief. And, what are they—these pilgrimages—but a union of public prayers and an increase of fervour in supplicating for help, at a time when we have such great need of grace, and such an amount of public and private mercies to sue for. Does not God tell us to ask if we are to receive? And, as never before have so many miseries called so loudly for Divine aid, is it incredible that

Mary, the Mother of Jesus our Brother, should come sometimes amongst us to revive our faith and renew in us the spirit of ardent prayer? Can it be truly alleged that such a supposition is inconsistent with what faith teaches, hope believes, and love has reason to expect. Are we to reject it only because the piety it awakens sometimes assumes a form unpalatable to our taste. Oh, sometimes we sorrowfully feel that there are souls enlightened, perhaps, but not warmed, by the beams of God's boundless mercies; and then we long for that promised outpouring of Divine grace which some think is at hand—of the spirit of love, as well as of light, which is “to renew the face of the earth.”

Whilst Natalie was spending, in the way we have described, the last days of the year 1841 and the beginning of 1842,

and that her life was undergoing a silent transformation, the friend of her youth was struck by successive and terrible sorrows. In the month of January, Olga—dressed for a ball, and her head adorned with flowers which she had not time to remove—was summoned to behold her father pass suddenly from life to death; and before the grief and the terrible emotions of this event had softened and subsided, Eugènie, her favourite sister and the idol of her young heart, was torn from her with equal rapidity though not so unexpectedly.

Olga's health gave way under this double grief. She fell dangerously ill, and it seemed probable that she would follow Eugènie to the grave. For a while, however, she recovered, but never was the same as before these catastrophes. She had received her death-blow, and her soul

had undergone a saintly change. As Natalie's history has again been brought into connection with that of her friend, we may quote here a passage from one of Olga's already published letters; for there can be no doubt that the feelings she was then experiencing reacted on Natalie, who was unconsciously preparing also to abandon, in another way, all worldly joys and possessions.

On the 10th of May, 1842, Olga wrote from Rome: "I am quite surprised at the serenity we all feel; I who last year could not think of the *possibility* of *her* death without shuddering and bursting into tears. I am so calm and peaceful that it almost frightens me. I wondered if it could possibly come from a want of feeling. But I have had—God has sent me—such good and consoling thoughts! I find that earthly

happiness—so much desired—so much regretted—is so little worth the trouble it gives. I have been deeply struck with the shortness of life, in which joys are so brief and mingled with sorrows that one can hardly distinguish them. But grief also passes away, and is often mixed with heavenly joys;—yes, everything passes away! This was always in my mind. During those terrible days I said to myself, ‘This will likewise cease, and when we shall have been for centuries in heaven, what shall we feel about these short moments of trial? We shall, indeed, thank God for them, for they will have been the means of teaching us the little value of this life, and of making us win that eternal and glorious existence we shall then be enjoying. God has granted me the grace—young as I am—of understanding

all this! Oh, I feel it to be an immense grace if I could only correspond with it! . . . The only thing to think of is to love God, to do as much good as we can, to save our souls, and to try to save those of others. There is enough in this to fill our hearts and lives, and even to fill them with happiness.’”

In Natalie’s soul—moulded as it was at that time by the strong workings of grace—such thoughts as these met with a quick response, and the desire of the two friends to meet again grew stronger than ever. It was evident that since their long separation they had advanced in a way which brought them still nearer to each other in heart and feeling, and that to be together would be a still greater joy than it had yet been. But this happiness was not in store for them. The readers of “The Sister’s

Story " may remember that on her return to Brussels, after leaving Rome in the month of October, 1842, Olga was seized with another attack of the illness which was to carry her to the grave. I will not dwell here on details given elsewhere as to the state of her soul during those months of suffering, or speak of her courageous preparation for death, and angelic feelings about it. Natalie and Catherine, who were watching from a distance, with anxious grief, the course of that hopeless illness, had several times implored their mother to take them to Brussels, where Olga was expecting them with equal eagerness. One day, fully appreciating how precarious was her state, she weighed with a strange indifference the probabilities of life and death which it presented, leaving it to God to incline the scales according to His will,

and declaring that whatever happened her position was a happy one. On one side of the balance—that of death—she reckoned the thought of heaven; and on the other—that of life—the joy of seeing again her dear Natalie.

At that moment, Olga still believed in the possibility of her recovery; but by the beginning of 1843 all hope of it had vanished, and she often inquired what were Madame Narischkin's plans. "Has she not promised to come?" she said, "and to bring me Catherine and Natalie?"

Her own brave and admirable mother did not know what to reply, for she had not ventured to urge Madame Narischkin, whose health was very delicate, to undertake so trying a journey in the winter. It seemed hard to invite her to witness the death of a young girl of the age of her

own daughters, who might also be too deeply affected by the sad scene. As the month of February advanced, Natalie wrote every day, and still received the same afflicting answers. At last her mother, seeing her children's grief, courageously made up her mind to afford them the consolation of a final parting, and Olga welcomed that hope.

But Madame Narischkin's strength failed before setting out, and the journey was put off for a few days. Meantime, those of Olga's life were numbered. Her friends felt it, and great was their anguish. But it so happened that a Russian lady, Madame Obreskoff, who was staying at Paris with no other object than the enjoyment of its gaieties and pleasures, most kindly proposed to Madame Narischkin to take her daughters to Brussels—an offer

which was gratefully accepted; and on the evening of the 9th of February, Catherine and Natalie left Paris with that obliging friend.

On the following day, the 10th of February, 1843, I wrote in my Journal: "My blessed sister departed from this world at one o'clock. How shall I describe what I felt when, an hour afterwards, I received a note from Natalie Narischkin, announcing their arrival, and that they were coming to see Olga! Oh! that was indeed a terrible moment! But the God of peace soon quieted our souls, and the friends of our beloved one felt, as we did, the consolation of praying by her remains. They cannot leave her. It is thus that they have met again after their separation at Naples. God orders all things as He pleases, and doubtless for the good of all."

Some years afterwards, whilst collecting these reminiscences, I added : “ Those friends whom Olga had so ardently wished to see again before her death, and whose conversion to the Catholic faith she had yet more ardently desired, still belonged to the Greek Church at the time I wrote the preceding lines. They passed the whole of that day by the side of that beloved one, and also the ensuing night. They shared the long silent watch of her mother, who for twenty-four hours remained motionless, holding her child’s hand in her own, and keeping off by that pressure the cold chill of death.

Who shall say what nameless communications took place during those hours between those pure and fervent souls praying on earth, and the disembodied spirit of their departed friend ? We cannot

fathom such mysteries ; but, so far as we do know, the future realized, beyond all her expectations, the hopes that Olga had carried with her to heaven. Both the companions of her youth became Catholics, and Natalie, the youngest and the dearest, was called to the highest of all vocations !





CHAPTER III.

1843.



WHAT has been said in the preceding chapter, accounts for the deep and lasting impression which the solemn scenes we have described made on Natalie, and no one will wonder that it remained stamped on her mind in a way which no subsequent events or changes could ever obliterate. There was something in the circumstances, which were surrounding and influencing her at that time, well adapted to strengthen her convictions, and to give them a reality and a depth they had not till then acquired.

For her friends at Brussels, that period was one of unprecedented emotions. Three successive bereavements in the course of one year, mingled with the most extraordinary graces and blessings, and fraught with holy examples and consolations, had produced in their souls a state of feeling quite incomprehensible to those who have never experienced the union of deep grief and supernatural joy. Sweet and awful are such moments. Everything in and around us seems transformed. Like flashes of lightning during a storm, they rend the clouds and open vistas of light which illuminate the surrounding darkness. If the soul could remain permanently possessed of that Divine light, we might almost say that sorrow could no longer exist; for the resistance of the will is the chief source of suffering, and resist-

ance ceases when we realize the ends of life, and fully accept the means to those ends.

But life resumes its wonted course—life with its inevitable activity, and its unceasing distractions. Time produces its natural results, and there are but few human hearts uninfluenced by its action. Supernatural grace subsides, and seems to abandon us to our unsupported strength, with less courage oftentimes, and less power to endure griefs which the world thinks we have forgotten, than in the terrible hours when God's hand was at the same time crushing and supporting us.

It was just in such a moment of singular grace that Natalie—with a heart and mind prepared for deep impressions—shared with her friends the anguish of bereavement and the extraordinary religious consolations which accompanied it.

It was now three years since she had met Alexandrine at Naples, and during that time Albert de la Ferronnay's young widow had made rapid strides in that path in which a soul—if it does not recede—must advance. In 1840, at Naples, her thoughts were still divided between the present and the past. She accepted without a murmur the exchange of her earthly happiness for the blessing of truth understood and embraced, but her mind still lingered over the memories of those vanished joys. With minute care she treasured up every fond reminiscence, and made of this work of love the dearest occupation of her life. But she had now entered on the last phase of her existence, during which she seemed almost to have a foretaste of its approaching consummation, and the perfect happiness at hand. She

had ceased to look back, and hastened on to the end with uplifted eyes and a heart at rest. The time of melancholy musings and of poignant regrets was past and gone. That dejection which three years before had been so visible and constant, had disappeared. Natalie had been deeply affected by the sight of a grief, gently, sweetly, submissively accepted; but the energy, the courage, the brightness, which had replaced it—even though as far as this world went gloom was besetting Alexandrine on every side—struck her as a far higher lesson, and a stronger encouragement to her own yearnings for a still more heroic life.

Science investigates with intense eagerness all the mysteries of nature. It watches with exemplary care and infinite interest the growth of the seeds embosomed in the earth. It searches into

the innumerable secrets of the transformation of matter. But is it not strange, that so many men devoted to the study of the exterior world, its mysteries and its beauties, can be so utterly indifferent to that other world, full of still deeper mysteries and admirable combinations, the fruits of which are apparent and marvellous to those who examine into it? Even the most sceptical philosophers, unless their souls are utterly perverted, recognize and admire those fruits. They appreciate boundless self-devotion, spotless purity, and unlimited charity.

Better than others they know that such virtues are rare productions; that selfishness, sensuality, and pride, are the natural growth of the plant called humanity, and that their total absence is a phenomenon. But if that phenomenon exists, if it occurs

and re-occurs, and if they are the same laws that produce it, is there nothing interesting in the study of those laws? Do they not themselves belong to that humanity so deeply concerned in the question? Is it not strange that more devote time and strength to the exclusive study of what goes on in the exterior world, and remain in such complete ignorance of that interior world so closely connected with their own being, and in which, by examining into the mysteries of other souls, they might make marvellous discoveries as to their own? A great writer has said, "That we must lend a more attentive ear to the accents which proceed from saintly souls than to those of the highest genius." Ought not the world of grace to be approached and investigated with more interest, eagerness, and respect, than even the world of nature?

Natalie did not at that time foresee the complete transformation, the germs of which were even then lying in her heart. Her eventual vocation was still concealed in the dim future, but she had made up her mind to hasten the hour of her abjuration—if indeed she had anything to abjure;—for the religion she was about to embrace was the only one she was acquainted with, and all the pious memories of her childhood and youth were connected with it. Her resolution rejoiced, and did not surprise, her friends. Her eldest sister was of the same mind with her, and had no other wish than to assist in its accomplishment. None of them foresaw the obstacles which arose when the first decisive step had to be taken.

It must be borne in mind that the whole childhood of these young girls had

been spent at Naples, where they had lived in the midst of religious practices which the tenets of the Greek Church—if even they had been under its influence—in no wise opposed. They had been taught from their earliest days to adore our Lord Jesus Christ, to venerate the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, to believe in the power of absolution, and the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. All these great fundamental Christian truths had been impressed upon them since their birth. Brought up at a distance from their native land, they felt themselves at home in the midst of that great universal Church which possesses the whole treasure of Catholic faith, and communicates it to all who belong to her, without distinction of place, language, nation, or race. A pious Russian, educated in a Catholic country, and then

returning to his own land, could scarcely find a home for his soul in the Greek so-called orthodoxy. The atmosphere of a local and national Church must be stifling to those who have felt for a while the throbbings of that universal life which knows no frontiers, which overflows the limits of seas, rivers, and mountains—and, as the Mother and Mistress of all Churches, bears the name of no particular nation. Alone, she ventures to declare that she is the *sole* possessor of the *whole* of revealed Truth. It seems difficult at first sight to understand how any Church claiming to teach can fail to make the same assertion; yet, whether it be said with exultation by her children, or in condemnation and hatred by her foes, the Catholic Church is the only one that takes up that position, and on that account she has preserved through-

out successive centuries, the name which expresses the idea she realizes. Like the good part Mary Magdalene chose, "it shall not be taken from her."

Often and often have her children abandoned her, but they have never succeeded in robbing her of her glorious name, recognized in spite of them, always and everywhere. As to other Churches and sects, if it is not from a nation or a man they borrow their name, they are forced to adopt some expression, or some epithet,—as in the case of the most recent secessions from Catholic truth,—which indicates its novelty even whilst claiming antiquity, by betraying the necessity of an addition to specify its meaning; for in our time, as in that of St. Augustine, the overpowering good sense of mankind, and the laws of human language, require that "*words*

should express what they mean." No ! that great name "Catholic" will never be given by friends or foes but to those who are really Catholics, and to the children of the Church to whom it belongs of right.*

For a long time Natalie gave no thought to controversy. It seemed to her

* We are perfectly well aware that the Russian and even the Anglican Church, in some of their official documents, call themselves Catholic. But as Cardinal Wiseman pointed out, in order to bear a name it is not enough to assume it ; others must give it to us, and that is the real difficulty. Good sense stands in the way, and the public voice of mankind will never give a usurped title to those who have no right to it. Infidels, as well as heretics and schismatics, have of late years talked of their teaching *as Catholic* ; but in spite of the abuse of the sacred name, the same test St. Augustine applied to the pretensions of the heretics of his day stands good in our times. Let a stranger enter a town in England, for instance, and ask to be shown the Catholic church. It is the poor little chapel in a bye-street that will be pointed out to him, not the beautiful church where Mass is simulated by the Ritualists.

as if all her pious habits, all the affections of her childhood, and, above all, the true Sacraments which the Greek Church has the inestimable advantage of preserving, made her feel as if she belonged to the Catholic Church. So strong is this bond of sympathy, that even when it is imaginary, as in the case of the Anglicans, who delude themselves with the idea that a chain with missing links is not a broken one, it has served to warm and to draw together hearts estranged by separation. Belief in the words of Christ, and in the Real Presence; love and adoration for the Lord, thus present on our Altars; attraction towards those who carry to the highest degree this faith and this love; has been the means of bringing into the Catholic Church a number of souls outside the fold, but belonging to it by the merit

of perfect good faith, and an ardent love of truth.

Far more must a member of the Greek Church have felt herself closely united with those whose faith is, in so many respects, identical with hers, whose practices she sanctions, and even whose counsels she ventures to adopt, by sometimes speaking of *Christian perfection* and the *spiritual life*.

But it is in this respect that she soon betrays her weakness; for, after all, in order to sustain this spiritual life, are not words and preaching, and books and Apostles, necessary? And how is this living life—if I may venture so to call it—to be led? how is it to be continually renewed, like the seasons in their course, if not in the Catholic Church?—which, while it subjects the mind to the blessed yoke of authority, never allows it to grow weary in a monotonous

round of formal observances, and possesses the whole deposit of faith, of which the Greek Church, when it broke away from her, forfeited a part. Ever since that time her hands have been empty, even whilst her outward aspect is splendid; and whilst St. Basil, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory, St. John Chrysostom, and so many other glorious saints and doctors found in the West innumerable and worthy successors, the Eastern Church—once so famous for its learning and eloquence, now struck with dumbness—neither speaks nor writes. Her children never hear her voice, and if they want spiritual writings to excite their piety, it is to the Catholic Church they must turn. There alone can they find food for their souls. It seems, indeed, as if nothing but a spirit of blind hatred keeps up the barrier which separates the Greek from the Catholic

Church ; a hatred founded on no argument, and which accepts for the Church, of which it has made itself the champion, conditions appertaining to death, utter silence, and the absence of all action and movement.

Be this as it may, and whatever are the bearings of this immense and momentous subject, no one can deny that the divergencies between us and the great Greek Church have nothing in common with those which divide us from any of the Protestant sects. Protestantism has attacked all the tenets of our religion, and altered almost every one of them. It has done away with the dearest objects of our faith, and annihilated the most sacred mysteries of Christianity. The Real Presence in the Holy Communion, penance and absolution, the honour paid to the Blessed Virgin, the invocation of saints,

the veneration of holy images—all have been swept away. With the exception of belief in the merits of our Saviour, every outward token of which is severely proscribed, there is nothing in common between Catholics and Protestants.

In the case of members of the Greek Church, on the contrary, it might almost be said that the barrier of separation is invisible, so much is their faith and their practice similar to our own, as far as the eyes, the soul, and the heart are concerned ; and therefore many of them scarcely feel the difference, till the day comes when they attempt to step over this barrier, and to take their share of the treasures of that Church, so like their own, and which can give them all that the latter can never supply. Yes, there comes a day when they cannot be satisfied with admiring, and

enjoying, and worshipping at a distance ; and an imperious yearning arises in the soul to participate with Catholics in that Sacrament of the Altar in which alone true life is found.

What does a sincere, an upright, a fervent conscience feel when enlightened as to those great mysteries ; when full of the love of Jesus which they reveal, it longs to press forward, and measure the nature of the obstacles in its way ? Is not every article of faith solemnly affirmed by the Catholic Church ? Is not every practice dear to piety more easy of fulfilment than in their own Church—Confession, Absolution, Holy Communion ? All those blessings are within reach, and is the thirst they inspire never to be quenched ?

Can a soul pining for truth, faith, and love, be stopped by the addition of the

word "Filioque" to the Nicene Creed? or by the difficulty of admitting that the chief pastor of the Western Church is likewise the rightful head of the Eastern Church?—or again, and above all, can such a soul hesitate in view of the political obstacle?—the greatest and most formidable of all—the only one indeed that will prove hard to overcome, and which it will require courage to encounter.

Such were Natalie's thoughts and previsions when she left Brussels at the end of February, 1843, and returned to Paris, with her sister, fully determined to ask her mother's consent to her conversion to the Catholic Church, and convinced that it would be easily obtained. In this hope she took leave of her friends, but only for a short time, for they intended in a month to follow her to Paris.



CHAPTER IV.

1843.

NATALIE'S hopes were soon undeceived. She wrote to her friends from Paris that her own and her sister's wish to be received into the Church was as strong as ever, but they could not look forward to their mother's ever giving her consent to it. Madame Narischkin had expressed surprise and extreme displeasure when they made their request, which seemed strange after all she had sanctioned and permitted. Her refusal, however, was absolute, and founded on reasons which ought not to weigh in such

a question, but which if they are once admitted are peremptory.

It was not that Madame Narischkin's conscience was opposed to [the Catholic religion, nor did she dread any danger or damage to her daughters' souls, in embracing it. No thought or fear of this sort influenced her. She had proved it by the entire freedom with which she had always allowed them to frequent Catholic Churches and join in Catholic worship. But if, on that side of the question—the only important one on such a subject—she would have cared very little to oppose her daughters' wishes, there were other considerations which irrevocably decided her against it, and about which she would listen to no arguments.

Nothing is further from my intention than to depreciate Natalie's native country, in many respects a great and noble one.

Personal and grateful reminiscences would forbid it. And I must here remark that there is a strength of patriotic feeling amongst Russians seldom affected by exterior circumstances. We have seen it in Madame Swetchine, from whose heart forty years' residence in France, and the many ties which bound her to that country, did not diminish the intense affection she always preserved for her native land. And still more so in the case of Count Gregoire Schuwaloff, of holy memory, who, as a Catholic priest and a monk, identified his religious vocation with his ardent love of Russia. And to the end this feeling existed in Natalie, even though from her earliest childhood she had lived away from her country, even though the cornette and the grey habit of a French Sister of Charity which she wore was

banished from it, even though she had detached herself completely from all the cares of earth.

It would be an offence to her memory to speak evil of her country ; but it would also be unjust to conceal the sort of difficulties which Russians had at that time, and still have, to overcome, when their convictions have become imperative, and they must act up to that incontrovertible and deep maxim, " Truth once known leaves us no option." *

These obstacles are twofold : in the first place, there is the private and personal opposition experienced everywhere by those who obey their convictions at the price of every sacrifice ; and then, secondly, the official political obstacles, specially Russian, —and totally different from this kind of

* " *La vérité connue oblige.*"

opposition in other countries,—because in no other nation is the favour of the sovereign and that of the government so inexpressibly important.

It is difficult for us, in this part of Europe, to realize the amount of courage—I was almost going to say heroism—required in a Russian, to brave, not only the sufferings and privations entailed by a change of religion, but that total eclipse of Imperial favour which seemed so terrible, especially during the reign of the Emperor Nicholas; and which appeared literally to deprive those of his subjects exposed to it of the beneficial light of heaven.

Noble examples have shown that many a Russian can scorn even such fears as these; but this was not the case generally speaking; and even high and honourable personages, in their language and attitude,

betrayed an excessive subserviency on such subjects, indicating a want of moral courage, one of the most fatal effects of a despotism, the abuses of which have excited in many minds a lawless and extravagant love of liberty.

If such considerations weighed in many cases on the consciences of individuals, it is not to be wondered at that a widow, the sole protectress of her children and responsible for their welfare, was terrified at the consequences that would result from their taking the step they proposed. She had no animosity at all against Catholicism, but nevertheless she was not to be deterred from her resolution to prevent her daughters, by every means in her power, from accomplishing an act looked upon in Russia not only as one of apostasy, but also of rebellion.

She was also possessed with the idea that Natalie's affection for Olga, and the feelings called forth by her death, influenced her resolution much more than any real convictions, and hence she hoped that time and her own determined opposition would end by shaking it. Divided between the performance of what she fancied to be her duty, and her wish not to vex her daughters, she continued, with more kindness than prudence,—according to her view of the question,—to allow them full liberty to accompany their Neapolitan friends wherever they went, and to join in all their pious practices. She never objected to anything of this sort, and protested solely against the only logical consequence of what she so freely sanctioned.

Such was the state of things when Olga's relatives arrived at Paris. Full of

their recent bereavement, they eagerly sought all the religious consolations abounding in it at that period, and which proved so soothing to their aching hearts. Alexandrine and her sisters-in-law did not find it more difficult than the daughters of the Duke de Serra-Capriola had done, to include Natalie and her sister in their daily visits to churches and convents. Both of them seemed, at that time, as fervent as ever, and not at all deterred by the obstacles in their way.

Even before the arrival of their friends from Brussels, they had gone to their dear convent in the Rue de Bac, and met there M. Aladel, the pious missionary priest we have already spoken of. Anxious to acquaint themselves with the history and the precepts of that religion which they were permitted to love, but not to embrace,

they put to him questions which he answered clearly and simply ; adding to those explanations, exhortations, simple also in their tone, but to which his deep sanctity lent something more persuasive than eloquence.

It did not require his long experience, nor that initiative power so often granted to those to whom God commits the guidance of souls, to show him what was passing in Natalie's heart. Her faith, her piety, her fervour, were visible to all who were intimate with her ; but beyond the feelings common to all pious persons, M. Aladel discerned in this young girl tendencies to a yet higher love and more heroic devotedness and self-sacrifice than any ordinary piety can produce or foster.

There are plants that cannot grow in our climates, and when we look on their

flowers, we feel sure that they have expanded under a more ardent sunshine than that of our northern skies. And this illustrates what we witness in certain souls. Neither piety nor the best desires possible on our part, nor the examples and exhortations of others, can ever generate them ; they are the result of a special ray of that Divine sun which gives life indeed and light to all, but whose burning touch draws a few favoured souls to the most sublime heights, and enables them to overcome all earthly attractions and even the natural inclinations of the heart.

M. Aladel had the spirit of an apostle and a missionary. He looked upon martyrdom as the highest of privileges. Life was, in his eyes, a transient illusion, and the world an abyss of nothingness. He belonged to that illustrious and devoted

Religious Order* which, more perhaps than any other, fertilizes the Church with the blood of its children, and continues to this day, in distant countries, to renew the heroic acts of the Saints, and of the glorious founders of Christianity.

Placed in communication with such a congenial soul as Natalie's, was it surprising that in his ardent zeal he sometimes forgot human prudence, and spoke out what was indeed perfectly true, and justified by the sequel, but not quite in accordance with the caution which her peculiar circumstances seemed to require. Was it not reasonable that, seeing in her all the marks of sincere conviction, of an entire faith in the teachings of the Church, and

* The order of Missionary Lazarists, founded, as well as that of the Sisters of Charity, by St. Vincent of Paul, and governed by the same General.

possessed of a thorough knowledge of her teaching, that he should have considered the alleged obstacles to be unreal, and advised her to disregard them? Was not his imprudence—if it is indeed to be so called—natural? Can we wonder that a man whose eyes were ever fixed upon the immutable truths of religion, should have held cheap the displeasure of an earthly sovereign? If a whole life-time of suffering was to result from it, would that seem much to an apostle accustomed to all the toils and pains of missionary life? Moreover, it was evidently not a question of conscience which influenced Natalie's mother in her opposition to her daughter's conversion; whereas the soul of her child was grievously troubled by this resistance, based as it was on secondary motives, unworthy of the deep importance of the

matter at stake, and frivolous beyond measure in the eyes of an ardent missionary.

Be that as it may, M. Aladel did not scruple to counsel Natalie to solicit, once more, her mother's consent; but if she could not obtain it, his advice to her was, to act without further delay. The time of their departure from Paris was at hand. They were to go first to Germany, and then to Russia. If she went away, without being received into the Church, it was impossible to foresee when she would be able to take this important step.

This was indeed the case. Natalie's friends were as anxious as M. Aladel. Natalie knew perfectly well that her mother's decision was unalterable, and that it was quite useless to speak to her again on the subject. Meantime, the day

but one before their departure arrived, and all hope seemed at an end. An idea then occurred to us, which, in the precipitation of the moment, we determined to carry out.

It is in the "Sister's Story" that the following episode ought, perhaps, to have found a place, for Alexandrine plays the chief part in it. I shall be excused, I hope, if, for the sake of greater clearness, I make this narrative somewhat personal.

Strong and sincere as were Alexandrine's religious feelings, she was by no means subject to over-excitement, and had naturally a strong distaste to anything like concealment. In her own case, she had not yielded to the powerful impulses which impelled her to join the Catholic Church, until, in a most touching letter, she had solicited her mother's consent; and

told her that, by the side of her dying husband, she could no longer, in deference to her wishes, delay her abjuration. But Natalie and Catherine's position was quite different from Alexandrine's when, at Venice, she wrote that letter. To disclose their intention to Madame Narischkin would have been at once to preclude themselves from the possibility of carrying it out, and perhaps to deprive themselves for ever of any opportunity of so doing. This was, at any rate, what they thought, and what we also believed. M. Aladel's opinion strengthened our purpose; and without waiting to consult him again—for there was no time to lose, seeing that on the following morning they were to leave Paris—we hastily settled with them that before day-break we should be at the door of their house, in the Rue de Ponthieu.

It was agreed that we should strike our hands together to give them warning of our arrival, and that they would then come down to us and drive to the chapel of the Rue de Bac; to be received into the Church by M. Aladel, and assist at his Mass. In this way they would have been at home again, and in their rooms, before their mother's hour of rising.

Such was the wild scheme in pursuance of which we started from our house before dawn; and leaving our carriage at the corner of the Rue de Ponthieu, proceeded on foot to theirs, in order to attract as little attention as possible. The door of the court was open when we arrived, but within and without everything seemed so still and quiet that we felt frightened at the noise we made in striking our hands together. We waited breathlessly for a few

seconds—no answer to our signal. Again it was repeated—the same silence ensued. What had happened? Had their plan been discovered? Did their courage fail them? Or had they fallen asleep? We stood there a little while in dire uncertainty, alarmed at the increasing day-light, and afraid every moment of being surprised. At last Alexandrine ventured to go into the house, and up the stairs. She thought of ringing or knocking gently so as to be heard by our friends, but too softly to attract the attention of others. I was waiting outside in great anxiety, and with some rising doubts as to the wisdom of our proceedings, when the window just above my head opened, and Natalie appeared there with an agitated countenance. She threw into the street her straw hat, which fell at my feet. And almost at the same

moment Alexandrine reappeared, looking much distressed, and followed by a servant, who picked up the hat. She hastily told me that our plan had failed, and there was nothing for it but to go away as quickly as possible. We got into our carriage, and told the coachman to drive to the Convent of the Rue de Bac, and during that drive Alexandrine told me what had happened.

Our young friends had sat up all night without undressing; and towards the morning, overcome by so long and unaccustomed a vigil, they had unconsciously fallen heavily asleep, so that when we gave the appointed signal they did not hear it, nor even Alexandrine's soft pull at the bell. It reached, however, the ears of an Italian physician who was travelling with the Narischkin family, and he opened the door. This was falling into the

enemies' hands, for this gentleman had always showed great disapproval of the religious tendency of the young ladies. He instantly guessed the state of the case, and somewhat uncivilly begged to know what Alexandrine wanted at that early hour, adding that he would immediately inform Madame Narischkin that she was there. At that moment, Catherine and Natalie, awakened by the noise, appeared on the landing-place—Catherine looking frightened to death, Natalie equally agitated, but still bent, if possible, on accomplishing her plan.

It was then that she opened the window and threw out her hat, with the vague and childish hope that by running down to fetch it she might get out of the house and escape with us. What she felt most in that instant was despair at the

thought of leaving Paris without having been received into the Church. Catherine, on the contrary, was so terrified that the wish seemed to vanish ; or at any rate she felt disposed to delay its realization to a distant future. The doctor, of course, drove them back into their room, and rudely dismissed Alexandrine by shutting the door in her face.

There is no doubt that he was quite right in what he did, and fulfilled the duty he owed to Madame Narischkin. We were in the wrong, but we did not think so at the time, and when we arrived at the convent it was not at all our imprudence that we repented of. M. Aladel, who had not quite understood the details of our plan, but only knew that he was to expect us, was chiefly struck with the consequences of our failure, and did not afford us any com-

fort. He said "that the early Christians were not so easily turned back by obstacles ; that they persevered and overcame them. But, of course, it was not given to every one to be courageous ;" and made other remarks of the same sort, which added to our regrets feelings of deep remorse.

It was indeed true that we had precipitately made our escape without saying or doing anything, and without making the least effort to compass our object ; and perhaps a little more energy and presence of mind would have carried the day. Now all hope was over ; our poor friends had left Paris, and we felt as if, through our fault, they had lost an only and last opportunity which would probably never occur again.

These thoughts harassed us so much, when we reflected over the matter after returning home, that at last, unable to calm

our minds on the subject, we determined to go and relate what had happened to two authorities as competent as M. Aladel. These were Father de Ravignan and Monseigneur Fornari, the Pope's Nuncio. We felt that from their judgment no appeal would be possible.

First, then, we went to the Jesuit's house in the Rue de Sévres, and waited a long time before we could see Father de Ravignan. When he came into the parlour, he was very much surprised to find us both in tears; what with fatigue, excitement, and the distress resulting from M. Aladel's reproaches, we were in such a state of nervous agitation that we could hardly speak without crying, and found it difficult to give a coherent account of what had passed. Nothing could exceed the kindness with which Father de Ravignan asked us the

cause of our grief, and the attention with which he listened to our statement; but when we related the events of the morning, his countenance assumed a severe expression. Great was the relief I experienced the moment I discovered the motive of that severity. "My dear children," he said, "up to this day you were zealous and I commend your zeal; but this morning you were rash and imprudent, and I decidedly blame you."

It was far more satisfactory to be told to repent of what we had attempted to do, than to regret that we had failed. The more we were scolded the happier we felt. Never were reproofs more welcome.

According to Father de Ravignan's opinion, we had been very wrong to advise our friends to take this step in defiance to their mother's commands. Submission to

parents, he said, was such an important duty, that nothing but very peculiar circumstances ought to militate against it, and he wondered that we had ventured on recommending it. At the age of Natalie and her sister, he thought it incumbent to exercise for a long time patience and perseverance. From what we had told him of their mother's kindness and indulgence, he could not but anticipate that the strength of their convictions would end by touching her; whereas a public and rash act, such as the one they had projected with us, would have been highly dangerous, and probably have produced disastrous consequences.*

* In Father de Pontlevoy's "Life of Father de Ravignan," a fact is related which would almost seem to contradict the line of opinion above expressed. But his singular prudence, in cases where circumstances made it necessary and a soul seemed to him unsteady in its

Such was the purport of Father de Ravignan's decision. It cheered us wonderfully. We began to hope that instead of punishing us for our want of courage, as M. Aladel had hinted, God had rewarded our good intentions by preserving us from the bad results of our imprudence. Father de Ravignan's words had always immense influence, but in this case we had no merit in submitting to his better judgment, for it was an incomparable relief to be delivered from an imaginary remorse.

We did not, however, give up our visit to the Nuncio, who had just arrived at

convictions, was combined with a remarkable energy, when there was nothing for it but to obey the voice of conscience, and brave the consequences. In such a case everything had to give way before that paramount obligation, and his were the words quoted above, "*La vérité connue oblige :*" "Known truth compels."

Paris, from Brussels, where we had seen a great deal of him. He had often blessed Olga during her last illness, had consoled and strengthened my mother in her sorrow, and been most kind to us all. We called upon him, not only to hear his opinion on the subject in question, but principally, in case he heard of our proceedings, to let him know exactly what had happened.

Our statement produced a much more startling effect upon him than even on Father de Ravignan. Monseigneur Fornari jumped up from his arm-chair, and his countenance—generally so mild and smiling—looked very stern.

“Indeed, my dear ladies,” he exclaimed, “you must have been mad to think of it!” And then he said the same things we had just heard in the Rue de Sévres; and added, that if we had suc-

ceeded, just complaints would have been made to him against us, and that he would have had the pain of feeling that he could not defend our conduct. In short, he showed us that we had been more fortunate than wise, which we readily acknowledged, glad as we felt to have to end that day by an act of humility instead of one of repentance.





CHAPTER V.

1844.

WHAT we related in the last chapter shows that good and even holy men can often differ widely in the view they take of different circumstances, and that it does not necessarily follow that the prudence of some judicious persons necessarily involves a condemnation of the eager zeal of others.

There is no doubt that at that time Natalie was acting very much on impulse, and was so liable to influence that her convictions could hardly be considered thoroughly matured. The laws of pru-

dence and filial duty were on the side of patience, delay, and a line of conduct in accordance with the opinion of those we had consulted, and quite opposed to the course we had so nearly induced her to adopt. And yet, is it quite certain that that venerable priest was in the wrong, whose humility—the great test of sanctity—led him to admit at once that he had been too hasty when we informed him of the opinion given by the two authorities we had consulted? In appearance he seemed to have been carried away too far by his zeal; but is it not possible that he clearly discerned the end which that chosen soul—unconsciously to herself—was pursuing? Was he deceived in his conviction of Natalie's ultimate vocation, even before she was received into the Church? May he not have felt like an.

experienced pilot who sees a bark entering the haven, and then—suddenly turning back—venture again on the troubled sea, daring the wind and waves, and in danger of never making again the port so nearly reached.

It was indeed with some such anxieties and regrets that M. Aladel lost sight of Natalie, trembling for her fate amidst the perils of the world's ocean, and yet hoping she would, one day, return to the place of refuge she had left. He knew, indeed, better than any one, that she was not left to float on the billows without a guiding star; and that those whom God keeps are safe in His hands.

It was from Stuttgard that Natalie wrote to her friends in Paris. Her first letters were full of nothing but her regrets for all she had left behind; but soon we

heard that the four sisters had been present at brilliant *fêtes* given in honour of a Russian Grand Duchess; had been much admired, and appeared considerably amused. With a rashness worthy of our recent impetuosity we hastily concluded from the fact that Natalie had been at a ball and enjoyed herself, that her wishes and resolutions had vanished like smoke, and rejoiced that no important step had been taken under the influence of such transitory feelings.

Whilst we were forming these rash judgments about her, Natalie was pursuing the even tenor of her way; and even in the midst of an apparently dissipated life, keeping in her heart a deep remembrance of the instructions she had received, and the unchanged desire to conform, eventually, her life and actions to

her faith. Not that she dreamed, at that time, of the complete abandonment of all earthly things which she was one day to put in practice. Even had the thought of it crossed her mind she would probably not have spoken of it. Simplicity and sincerity were her leading characteristics. People sometimes looked upon her as an enthusiast, because when she spoke of the soul, or of God, she showed strong and deep feelings, such as those expressed in a letter we have already quoted, which she wrote long before the events that had recently impressed her. But there always was measure in her character, in her mind, in her actions, and in her language. She never exaggerated, never stated things incorrectly. Her voice was sweet and gentle, like her face ; and whatever might be the strength of her convictions, and the

warmth of her heart, she never spoke in a loud and excited way. The training of a religious life subsequently confirmed and increased this natural equality of soul, but found nothing to correct in her on that score.

During this period of separation from Catholic friends, she seldom mentioned her own interior feelings. She was the less inclined to write about them, in consequence of her sister Catherine's resolution to remain in the Greek Church. Obstacles had seemed to her arguments, or, at any rate, tokens of the course she was to take. Natalie silently adhered to her determination, in perfect uncertainty as to the time when it would be possible to act upon it, and with no clear prospect as to the future in any respect.

Meanwhile, the increasing weakness of

Madame Narischkin's health led to a change of plans, which ended in making her and her daughters settle at Venice for the winter, instead of returning to Russia.

During the first months she spent in that town, no change occurred either in Natalie's outward existence or her inward life. Her convictions were, however, put to the test by the efforts of a Greek priest, in whom her mother had great confidence. She wished to combat her daughter's religious bias, not only by worldly distractions, but also by the arguments of one of the ministers of her own Church. This was right and natural, under the circumstances, and a legitimate means of defence; the only one which offered possibility of success. But the result did not answer her expectations. Natalie had not forgotten any of M. Aladel's teachings; and had

sometimes written to submit to him the thoughts and doubts which crossed her mind. She was, therefore, prepared to meet objections, and to put questions herself. Far from shaking her faith in the Catholic Church, these conversations, which her mother had expected would have that result, only served to confirm her belief, and to strengthen her resolution.

During one of these interviews, a Catholic priest was unexpectedly shown into the room, to the great astonishment of the Greek priest. He was the bearer of a letter from Miss Fraser, one of Natalie's Neapolitan friends, whose thoughts and affections were ever following her from a distance. Nothing resulted at that time from this meeting; but, later on, she renewed acquaintance with D. Daniele Canale, her friend's messenger, and

numbered him amongst the fathers and friends of her soul.

That year proved a very eventful one for Natalie and her sisters. Whilst her own resolves were deepening in her heart, and her future fate seemed more undecided than ever, proposals of marriage—particularly agreeable to their mother—were made to Marie and Elisabeth Narischkin; but before these marriages could take place, the most unexpected and painful blow suddenly darkened these family rejoicings. After long years of feebleness and suffering, which had been so habitual as to cause no immediate apprehension to herself or her children, Madame Narischkin fell dangerously ill, and died, surrounded by her son and her four daughters, two of whom remained unprotected orphans, bereft of the care of parents, and

estranged since childhood from the rest of their family and their native land.

This was, for Natalie, one of those blows which at certain moments change the whole aspect of life, and sweep away obstacles in a sad and terrible manner. Her sisters' marriages were put off for a year, and it was decided that they should all spend that time of mourning at Moscow, in the house of one of their uncles—M. Alexis Narischkin,—Natalie's godfather,* who most kindly offered them a home.

This decision added to the keenness of

* Natalie's godmother was the Baroness Strogonoff first wife of Count Strogonoff, who was Russian Ambassador at Constantinople, and mother of Count Serge, Count Alexander, and Count Alexis Strogonoff. A son of Count Alexander's married the Grand Duchess Marie, daughter of the Emperor Nicholas. Natalie's godmother,—the Baroness Strogonoff, *née* Troubetzko,—was her grandmother's sister-in-law on the paternal side, Madame Narischkin, *née* Strogonoff.

Natalie's grief for her mother's death so great an anguish as to her own religious position, that it is almost surprising that at her age it did not overwhelm her; and that, left entirely to her own inspirations, she ventured to take the step which circumstances and her firm convictions pressed upon her.

We have already spoken of the number of reasons—foreign to religion—which had carried to the utmost point the severity of the Russian Government against Catholics. Every one knows that it was impossible for a subject of the Emperor Nicholas to embrace that faith without running the greatest risk, and provoking that monarch to one of those bursts of angry displeasure during which he measured neither his words nor his acts.

Alexandrine de la Ferronnays had

experienced this at the time of her conversion, and yet she had not abandoned the Greek Church ; and it might have been supposed that it would be indifferent to the head of the Russian Church whether or not a Protestant became a Catholic. Even Catholics belonging to other nationalities were far from enjoying religious liberty in Russia. No foreign Catholic priest was permitted to cross the frontier unless he took the impossible oath that under no circumstances, and whatever might be their desires and convictions, he would receive any persons into the Church. Catholic worship was proscribed throughout Russia, except in a very small number of churches authorized by the government, or in the chapels of the Embassies.

This was the position of things which Natalie was obliged to look in the face—a

serious one for herself, and a still more serious one to those who, on her account, would be involved in the inconveniences and dangers of an act for which they were not responsible, and had even opposed and blamed. To what grief, to what annoyance, she would subject the excellent relatives who were preparing so kindly and cordially to welcome them!—and was there not reason to fear that her sisters, too, would suffer in consequence of a resolution they disapproved? What, too, would become of her as a Catholic in Russia? Surrounded by hostile influences, prejudices, and material difficulties of every sort, how would it be possible to practise her religion? But, on the other hand, how could she forego what had been for two years the spiritual sustenance of her soul, and the reception of that still more

sacred food which she yearned for every day with more intense longings?

These perplexing considerations added to Natalie's sufferings during those first days of deep sorrow. She did not want to agitate Catherine, who, quite absorbed in her grief, seemed to have forgotten for the time being her religious anxieties. It was useless to speak to her other sisters; they could not help, and would certainly have blamed, her. Once she sounded her brother on the subject, and found she would have to encounter his most decided opposition, not so much on the score of religious scruples, as on account of the displeasure such a step would certainly cause to their relatives in Russia, and especially the pain it would give to their grandmother.

Natalie did not argue the point. What

could she say in answer to those who did not the least understand the feelings which actuated her? In this trying dilemma she saw but one way of proceeding, and that was to make up her mind to act on her own responsibility and alone, so as to be able afterwards solemnly to declare that her brother and sisters had been entirely ignorant of what she was about to do; and that, whatever penalties might be attached to it, she was the only person to whom blame could be attached. She looked the future in the face, and felt that amidst the sufferings and trials she must in any case encounter, the only one she could not endure was a longer delay as to the solemn act which was to make her a child of the Catholic Church.

So far, her determination was taken; and after many ardent prayers she began

to cast about for the persons who could assist her in carrying it out. It was not long before she resolved to apply in this emergency to some pious Austrian friends she had made acquaintance with that winter—the Count and Countess Revicky. They enabled her to execute the plan she had formed, which was to be received into the Church, and to make her first Communion as a Catholic, before her departure for Russia; to hasten this conclusion as much as possible, as the time was short; and at the same time to prepare for it as fervently as was possible, by means of instructions as frequent as time and secrecy would admit of. Above all, to observe a complete silence, which would shield her relatives from the risk she was about to run. This she thought as imperative a duty in its way as that of act-

ing up to her convictions, now that there was no one in this world who had a right to interfere between God and her own conscience.

Grace was given her to perform what she had thus firmly and calmly resolved. The last days of her stay in Venice were devoted to the accomplishment of this life-long desire. The exterior freedom of action she had so long enjoyed was in no wise curtailed at that time, and she went to church as often as she liked with the Countess Revicky, who enabled her several times to receive the instructions of the Revd. Father Ferrari, Superior of the Jesuits at Venice; and, at last, after a fervent and conscientious preparation, she was received into the Church on the 15th of August, 1844, in the presence of her friends, the two witnesses of that solemn act.

Natalie wrote on that day the following letter to the Sisters of Charity, of the Rue de Bac—to them she was not afraid of imparting her secret; they did not belong to the world from whom she wished to conceal it:

“ Venice, August 15th,

“ Feast of the Assumption, 1844.

“For me, a memorable day! Oh, my dear friends! my dear Sisters, rejoice! I can call you my Sisters, for I am now a Catholic. My dear friends, my good Father Aladel, and my good Sisters of the Rue de Bac—you whom God and the Blessed Virgin appointed to watch over me—you can rejoice to-day, for your prayers have been heard! At last I am happy,—happy to have been taken quite into the fold, but grieved at my own unworthiness.

“This morning, at eight o'clock, I abjured the Greek Church schism. Can you account for such a grace being vouchsafed to me? Yes, you can, because you have much too good an opinion of me; but I, who know how worthless I am—how wretched, how ungrateful—I cannot understand so great a mercy! My dear friends, how I shall always remember this day! I do not feel as if I was yet grateful enough for it. But God has taken pity upon me, and He will continue to do so.

“How can I thank you enough, all of you to whom I owe my happiness? Circumstances combined to delay my conversion till this happy day, the Feast of the Assumption. May the Blessed Virgin protect me all my life, as she has done on this her glorious festival!

“Surrounded and watched as I am, I cannot write at greater length, I wanted only to tell you of my happiness. Do, all, thank God for me.”

That day, the most important of her life, was soon followed by her departure from Venice, for that distant and stately native land of hers, which she thought of with a mixture of curiosity, affection, and dread. Full of courage, and inwardly strengthened, she went on her way, keeping the secret of the great change in her life not only from her own relatives, but also from all the friends who were following her in thought and addressing to her expressions of sympathy and words of advice.

Many of them exhorted her now to be very prudent. Her return to Russia, her residence in the midst of her family, and

all the actual circumstances of her position, seemed to them unsurmountable obstacles to the present accomplishment of her wishes. Natalie did not reply to these letters. She neither spoke nor wrote, and months elapsed before she broke this silence. Until the month of September of the following year, when she left Russia never to return there, and was no longer afraid of expressing her thoughts, not a single letter did she write except the one we have already transcribed. But on her way from Venice to Moscow she stopped with her family at Vienna, and had the happiness of meeting there, besides many other friends, Miss Miana Fraser and her relatives.

It would have been a great relief to Natalie to have been able to converse with Miss Fraser and to have opened her heart to her; but though her companions had no

idea of the step she had actually taken; they were fully aware of her Catholic tendencies, and anxious to guard against anything that would strengthen them. Miana's well-known fervour made her an object of suspicion. The friends were, in consequence, carefully watched; and poor Natalie would have been obliged to leave Vienna without having spoken a word to her in private, if Miss Fraser had not in spite of her ill health made an effort to pay an evening visit to the friends with whom the Narischkins were staying. The room happened to be, as she hoped, full of people, and the two friends were able to withdraw for a moment into the embrasure of a window. In a low voice Natalie said, "Dear Miana, I am a Catholic." "God be praised," was the answer to this whisper. "But why do you go to Russia?" "I am

obliged to do so, I cannot avoid it." "Are you aware of the state of things there?" "Yes." "What will you do?" "I shall be silent as long as I can, but if it becomes necessary I will own the truth." "And God will do the rest," Miana added, deeply affected by the heavenly expression of Natalie's face as she uttered those last words.

Nothing more could be said, for even this brief colloquy had been noticed, and it was found impossible to renew it. Still Natalie contrived to ask Miss Fraser, in English, to get a crucifix, which she had put into her carriage, blest for her. This was happily achieved; but they did not meet again, and Natalie did not succeed in seeing a priest, which she earnestly desired to do before pursuing her journey, and entering upon what she felt to be a hard exile for her soul.

We shall have often to speak again of Miss Fraser and her sisters. At the moment we are writing of, there was in their family circle a young girl who then for the first time saw Natalie. She hardly spoke to her at all during this short stay of hers at Vienna, but the expression of her countenance, which she used to gaze at from a distance, made the deepest impression upon her mind. "The divine fire in her heart seems to shine in her face," she said, speaking of one who at that time she hardly knew, but whom later on she was so tenderly to love, and so closely to imitate. This young girl was Marie de Bombelles.





CHAPTER VI.

1844—1845.

AFTER this short interruption Natalie continued her journey, relying on the grace of God which had hitherto accompanied her steps, and confident that it would not fail her amidst new trials and difficulties. Those she encountered were not, however, of the sort which in past days and in our own times have so often attended conversions. She had not to bear harsh treatment at the hands of her relatives. They were neither unjust nor unkind to her. The sufferings she endured were of another sort, and per-

haps more trying than persecution to one as gentle, as amiable, as tender-hearted and generous as Natalie, and to whom it was anguish to give pain. What she had to struggle against was the influence of tenderness, kindness, and strong family affection. Perhaps also against the enervating effect of that excessive comfort and luxury peculiar to the homes of persons of rank in Russia, and little favourable to vigorous efforts and stern self-sacrifice. This, however, can hardly be reckoned amongst the obstacles in her way.

Whatever may have been said by persons who chose to ascribe her conversion and her subsequent vocation to versatility of character,—a strange assumption indeed, considering that this tendency is a proof of weakness, and therefore little likely to lead to one of the strongest

efforts a soul is capable of—we may safely assert that she was not liable to the seductions of worldly attractions; recent impressions were too powerful and too vivid to allow of it. What she felt and suffered from was the privation of a happiness understood, and for a brief while enjoyed, as she had enjoyed it—whom God was leading by rapid strides in the path which she was thenceforward to tread with ever increasing speed.

The privation of Holy Communion may not indeed have been felt so keenly by one who had only been a Catholic for a short time, and previously belonged to a Church the most pious members of which only approach the Sacraments three or four times a year, as by persons who have been in the long and devout habit of frequently communicating. But she had

intently valued this blessed privilege during the few days it had been vouchsafed to her, and ardently longed for a repetition of the graces enjoyed at Venice before her departure.

The feelings we speak of, and which we know her to have experienced,—for the friends who heard her express them in her simple and truthful manner attest it,—cannot be fully understood by persons who have all their lives been in full enjoyment of the means of grace the Church provides for her children, and have never known the painful yearnings of souls deprived of these blessings by spiritual exile and persecution. Not that Natalie was persecuted by her family; we have already stated that this was far from being the case. But was it not the official persecution of a government directed by an

arbitrary and despotic will, which obliged one so open and candid to conceal her change of religion? Natalie had no fears as to the kindness of her relatives. She would not have been afraid to impart her secret to her uncle, her brother, and her sisters, whose affection for her daily increased. The only reason which made her endure the weight of so trying a concealment, and subjected all her actions and words to a most painful constraint, was the dread of exposing her family to the effects of formidable laws; and, if she was found guilty, of involving them as accomplices in the penalty. Whether she exaggerated to herself this danger, and conjured up unnecessary fears, we can hardly tell—the future went far to show they were not unfounded, and at that time the utmost amount of apprehension was justifiable.

This must ever be the case where one paramount will reigns supreme, and human despotism enforces its own decrees in spiritual matters.

During those days of trial, Natalie felt consoled by the intense gratitude and perfect peace which attends the certainty of faith, following a period of anxious doubt. A deep inward joy at having reached an end long pursued, and the inexpressible feelings with which those who have always sought and loved the truth take, as it were, full possession of it, and compare it with all they know at last to be untrue; such were the subjects of her private prayers and thanksgivings, when in the midst of her relatives she stood in the Greek Church, where she still accompanied them,—that Church whose spiritual riches, as far as they went, she

knew to be still her own, though she no longer belonged to its restricted communion, and had regained all its schism had forfeited. But it was at those moments that her longings for the worship and Sacraments of her true mother—the Catholic Church—became so ardent that they seemed to wear her out.

Meanwhile Lent was approaching, and Natalie's fears and anxiety increased. She had all along thought with dread of that period, and hoped that some circumstances might arise which would enable her to profess her faith without injuring her family. Nothing, however, occurred to change the position of things, and she felt the time to be at hand when it would be necessary to lay aside concealment, and at any risk to confess the truth. It had been possible and lawful for her—situated as

she had been—to go to church with her relatives, and stand by the side of her sisters during the long services of the Greek Liturgy. But at Easter, when they would all go to Communion, she could not possibly receive it at the hands of a Greek priest, and explanations would be required.

The whole family, with that publicity which is customary in Russia, prepared to perform their Easter duty, and a few days before the feast approached the Sacraments—all but Natalie. Her heart burning with love of God and the desire of a close union with our Lord, she remained deprived of the Sacraments and separated from those about her—even more than from her Catholic brethen—with whom she could, at any rate, unite herself by an ardent spiritual Communion.

It required courage for so gentle and

affectionate a girl to separate herself thus publicly from her sisters and all her relatives at so solemn a moment; and when she saw in her uncle's face an expression not so much of displeasure as of sorrow her anguish increased. She had so often pictured to herself this day, and now it had arrived—there was no possibility of further delay—the long-deferred explanation had to be given, and all the consequences of the step she had taken accepted.

It may be supposed with what feelings she obeyed her uncle's summons, when after Mass he sent for her, and in a very kind and paternal manner reproached her for her apparent want of religious fervour; inquired for what reason she did not join her family in the performance of so sacred a duty as that of the Easter Communion; and, in order to mark his strong feeling on

the subject, he added, "that really he would like better to see her a Roman Catholic than indifferent to the duties of her religion."

Her uncle's words and his emotion would have constrained her to declare the truth, even if she could have possibly evaded giving an answer to so direct a question. Without further hesitation she therefore related to him exactly all that had taken place during the last years; told him how long she had waited, how strong were her convictions, the resolution she had taken, and the act she had accomplished at Venice; her reasons for keeping it secret, and the imperative duty which had precluded her from receiving Communion in a Church to which she no longer belonged.

Doubtless God inspired her to utter what

was right, and inclined the heart of her uncle to listen favourably to her avowal; for whilst she was trembling at the thought of what he would say, she saw that his eyes were filled with tears, and felt that he was looking at her with sadness, and no anger. Never did she forget or cease to be grateful for that moment of unspeakable relief. Though this excellent man was grieved and alarmed at what he had heard, he not only spoke gently to his niece, but kissed her most affectionately, and told her that what she had revealed to him would not prevent his loving her as much as ever, or change in any way his feelings in her regard; and, in truth, they never varied then, or at any other time of his life.

Natalie's heart was much relieved by this disclosure, which made an important

and happy change in her life at Moscow, by putting an end to all concealment with her own family. At first she almost hoped from her uncle's kindness that he would help her to practise her religion. But this was not the case. On the contrary, he particularly requested her not to impart the secret except to her nearest relatives and most intimate friends. Once only—three days after her conversation with M. Narischkin, on Holy Thursday—was she able to set her foot in the French Chapel. Some persons with whom she was driving proposed, out of curiosity, to go in and visit the Sepulchre, and for a few instants Natalie knelt down and prayed with the full fervour of her faith and love.

This was the single joy of this sort which was granted to her during what we must call her exile; for even in the midst

of her family, and in her own country which she dearly loved, she felt severed from the true home of her soul. Man does not live by bread alone. We cannot do without that other food which our spiritual existence requires; when the land which has given us birth denies to us this sacred sustenance, we do not cease to love it and to hope for better days, but we cannot dwell in it contentedly, or cease to yearn for religious freedom.

M. Narischkin's conduct after the truth had been made known to him sufficiently proves that Natalie's previous anxieties and precautions were well-founded. So good, so pious, so generous a man, with the kind feelings towards her he constantly evinced, would never otherwise have thought it necessary to forbid her to practise a religion which he so entirely forgave her for

embracing. We cannot suppose that he would have insisted on so complete a secrecy if reasons, quite independent of religions, had not made it necessary, or that he would easily have considered those difficulties as insuperable.

Natalie was accordingly obliged to content herself with the consolation of having no longer to disguise anything from her family. This was a great boon, but it was for the time being the only improvement in her destiny. No freedom was allowed her as to the practice of religious duties, and she had also to undergo painful discussions with some of her relatives, who kept her secret strictly for their own sakes, but did not spare her reproaches and animadversions. But much as she had to sigh for, and great as were her longings for the time when her outward existence would har-

monize with that interior life hitherto sustained only by patience and sacrifice, she did not cease to thank God for all that He had done for her. Her heart was also overflowing with gratitude towards her kind relatives.

Another of her uncles—the old Count Strogonoff—had received the news of her change of religion with as much indulgence as M. Narischkin, which, considering the strength of his attachment to the Greek Church, was hardly to be expected. In addition to Natalie's singular attractiveness, she must have been gifted at that time with the power of softening, if not of dissipating, prejudices. The old Russian nobleman, full as he was of devotion to his own form of worship and aversion to Catholicism, not only abstained from addressing to her a single word of re-

proach, but seemed bent on showing her more affection than to her sisters, as if to testify that he in no wise resented the act she had conscientiously performed.

Her trial was meanwhile drawing to an end, the year of mourning nearly elapsed, and the two marriages, which had been postponed after Madame Narischkin's death, were now to be solemnized at Vienna towards the latter part of the autumn. Natalie had then reason to rejoice that she had resolved on being received into the Church before her departure for Russia, and that her family were now all aware of the step she had taken; for of their own accord they all advised her to return to Venice with her sister Elisabeth, who was going to live there after her marriage. Catherine, on the contrary, was to come back to Russia

with her brother. Had Natalie not decided to act at once at the time which followed her mother's death, her conversion—like her sister's—might have been indefinitely delayed, and those years of her life, which proved so full of important and blessed results, spent in useless and listless inactivity. God tunes His voice—if we may so speak—according to the amount of strength with which souls are gifted, and the degree of perfection to which He calls them. It had so long and so loudly sounded in Natalie's hearing, that she could not have delayed obeying it without incurring the risk of never hearing it again.

Full of tender affection for those she left behind, but also of a secret irresistible joy, she left Moscow with her sisters in the beginning of September, 1845, and

arrived at Vienna some days afterward. She dated thence the letter I alluded to in the last chapter. It was the first in which she ventured to express openly the happiness of her heart :

“ Vienna, September 15th, 1845.

“ As I can, at last, write to you quite freely, I will not put off a moment confiding to you what I should have liked to have told you long ago, and that is the announcement of my return to the true faith. On the 15th of August, the glorious Festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, I had the happiness of making my abjuration in the church of the Jesuits at Venice. The Rev. Father Ferrari, whom you perhaps know, directed and assisted me in the accomplishment of a resolution I felt I could no longer delay, and which

I thank God He inspired me to act upon.

“I do not think you will blame me for not having followed the wise and prudent advice you gave me in your letter, but I had too strong a conviction the moment was arrived. There was no time to lose, and dangerous would have been the results if I had unhappily allowed the opportunity to escape. God in His merciful goodness removed all the obstacles in my way. I had the consolation of finding that my brother's chief objection to my wish was the fear that it would give pain to my grandmother. I therefore resolved not to compromise any one, and to be secretly received into the Church. For my own part I accepted everything that could befall me, rather than to die out of the communion of the true, the infallible

Church, against which the gates of hell will never prevail.

“ You know in how wonderful a manner God has ordained it all, and have perhaps already in your heart thanked Him for His goodness to me and all of us. I am now as happy as I can possibly be, God having granted the prayers of so many pious souls who prayed for my return from that spiritual banishment which I hope never again to be subjected to, though I must say that the kindness of my relatives by far exceeded my expectations. They have been not only indulgent, but tender and loving towards me, pitying rather than blaming me for what I have done. My uncle Alexis especially has been quite an angel of goodness in his behaviour to me; and old Count Strogonoff, whose severity with regard to religious matters is

notorious, never gave me the least reason to suppose that he resented at all my conversion, and behaved to me in the most affectionate manner, not only when I saw him with my sisters, but also when I was alone with him.

“Poor Catherine goes back to Russia, to our intense regret, and I should have shared the same fate had it not been for my decisive act at Venice; for my other sisters tell me that they could never have otherwise ventured on the responsibility of taking me with them. They have said this over and over again. I can only wonder at God’s goodness, and bless Him for it. How should I ever have resisted so long a trial?—I, who am so weak and cowardly when human respect is in question. Oh, do not omit to say a prayer for me, and to make an act of thanksgiving to

the Divine Heart of our Lord and the most Holy Virgin Mary. I wish very much indeed to see you again, and I hope God will so ordain everything, in His great goodness, that this desire may be fulfilled.

“The two future husbands arrived here yesterday. It was a joyful day for us all. We had two bottles of champagne at dinner in honour of the occasion, and it was all very lively, happy, and amusing. To-day they are all out shopping with Natalie—Friesenhof*—buying their plate, linen, etc. It is very pleasant to see so many happy faces, and to listen to nothing but pretty speeches. Everybody is in spirits, and forgets the long and painful separation which must follow. We hope that both

* Niece of the Countess Xavier de Maistre, and wife of Baron Friesenhof, an amiable and dear friend of the four sisters.

marriages will take place this day week, and three or four days afterwards we shall all go our different ways. My brother accompanies us to Venice, and then will return here to join Catherine and take her with him, first to Stuttgard, and then to Russia. I say nothing about Miana, because I know that she corresponds with you, but I go and see her every day, and always with greater pleasure.

“Excuse this long rambling letter, and believe me, my dear Countess,*

“Yours most affectionately,

“NATALIE.”

It was during these days of preparation for her sisters' marriages that Natalie received herself a proposal of that sort, which, considering the uncertainty of her future

* This letter was addressed to the Countess Lebzeltern.

fate, might almost have seemed providential. A Catholic young man of good family, who had made acquaintance with her four years before, and had since been travelling in distant countries, came back to Vienna unchanged in his feelings towards Mademoiselle Narischkin. He proposed to her, and for a moment she seemed a little to hesitate as to the answer she should give to this suitor. It was the last instant of her life in which she felt any uncertainty as to the path which God called her to choose. Obstacles arose which might indeed have been surmounted, but she made no effort to overcome them ; and after this transient vision had vanished she felt that her heart, her mind, and her will were in possession of a freedom never to be foregone for the sake of any earthly attachment or human tie.



CHAPTER VII.

1845.

THE painful separations which followed the wedding festivities threw a shade over Natalie's early days of freedom. It was a regular dispersion. The four sisters parted at that time never to meet all together again in this world. Marie—Madame de Valois—went with her husband to Stuttgart, poor Catherine returned alone to Russia, and Natalie accompanied her sister Elisabeth and her husband—the Baron de Petz—to Venice, where they were going to take up their abode.

We can hardly believe that one who has ever lived in Italy does not wish, in the depths of his heart, to see it again; and, whatever may be the country of his birth, can help feeling, when he looks once more on that fair land and that lovely sky, that he is returning to a loved home. In fact, like everything in nature, and like the light of day itself, that beauty belongs to all who have eyes to see it, as much as to those who beheld it from the opening dawn of infancy. It is ours as much as theirs, inasmuch as it emanates from that supreme beauty which is our common heritage and patrimony; and never can we see ever so faint a reflection of it in this world, without feeling our hearts expand and rest in a conscious sense of enjoyment and possession. It will strike us, I think, if we analyze this

feeling, that however entrancing may be our admiration of beauty in this world, we are more delighted than astonished at it. Were we suddenly transported from the icy regions of the North Pole to the shores of the bay of Naples; did we look for the first time on the full light of day, or the marvellous magnificence of nature;—there is something in the depths of our souls which would respond to all the manifestations of creative power,—and, surrounded by its most glorious sights, we should feel that they were akin to us and that our hearts were at home in the midst of them.

This thought leads to another, and suggests the idea that on the day when we emerge from the land of shades and dreams, and enter on the eternal realities of a future state, we shall experience the same feeling. Our hearts will indeed be

filled with joys which they had never conceived, our eyes will behold what they had never looked upon, and our ears hear what they had never heard; but even, as we shall then behold our poor human form endowed in our Lord Jesus Christ with all the glory of God, we may, I think, reckon on finding in heaven the reality of all the earthly shadows which have charmed our sight and attracted our heart on earth. Happy those who, having kept their hearts disengaged from the thrall of earthly objects, will exclaim on that day with a thrill of unutterable rapture, "There they are, those beautiful but transient visions, once so misleading and so easily lost; there they are in their reality, in their abiding plenitude, in their transfigured and deathless splendour. We recognize and we hail what our hearts

used to desire and seek. It all belongs to us now; the end is won, we are at home for ever!"

But leaving aside these speculations, of too high a sort to dwell on, let us return to Venice, where we have left Natalie surrounded by all the spiritual resources she had so long pined for, free to practise her religion, and to profess the faith cherished for years in the silent sanctuary of her soul; glad also, we may add, to see again that bright blue sky which from her childhood she had loved.

This was a happy time for her, even though the recent parting with two of her sisters and the afflicting remembrance of her last stay in Venice imparted to it a shade of sadness. Liberty of conscience and peace of heart—those priceless blessings—were hers, and she seemed to enter

on a new life. Her sister Elisabeth and herself differed both as to their characters and their convictions; but as they were tenderly attached to each other, this did not affect the sweetness of their intercourse or their familiar intimacy. In her sister's husband, Natalie found a real brother, who, quite as much as his wife, delighted in her society, and felt that the happiness of their home was increased by her companionship. They never thought of interfering with Natalie's independence in religious matters, and relied fully on her delicate care not to compromise them; and if they were sometimes inclined to think her too much absorbed in the new interests which were beginning to fill her life, and too fond of the society of persons of her own faith, they looked upon it as

the result of the first fervours of a convert, and hoped that time and distractions, and the absence of all contradiction, would gradually bring her back within the limits of what they considered a sufficient amount of religious observance, and a freedom from exaggeration.

At that time God was already reigning supremely in a heart full of good will, but as to the present direction and the future scope of her life Natalie had no wishes and no previsions. She was walking, as it were, with her eyes shut, and guided by the Hand of One who was leading her on, and making her advance almost unconsciously. But we may infer that the state of her soul was visible in her face; for Maréchal Marmont, who often saw her at Venice, used to call her, half in admira-

tion and half in jest, "A little runaway from Heaven." *

Providence seemed always to provide for Natalie friends well fitted to encourage her piety and further her progress in holiness. The persons whom she was thrown with at that time were of the utmost advantage to her soul, and their influence led to important results. In the first place, she saw a great deal of M. and Madame Rio, who spent a considerable portion of that year at Venice with their young daughters, then just emerging from childhood. A young and pious friend of theirs—Mdlle. Valerie Mogg—immediately appreciated Natalie, and had herself all the qualities which were sure to secure a return of affection. M. Rio's salon, wherever he might be staying, in that

* Une petite échappée du Ciel.

active period of his life, was always the head-quarters of a small society distinguished by a singular simplicity of life and an intense intellectual activity. The subjects discussed on these social occasions were always interesting, and the tone of conversation high. It was in the light of Catholic truth that every event or theory was considered.

M. Rio * was then engaged in his great studies on Christian Art; and those who heard him at that time pour forth the thoughts that filled his mind, never forgot that thrilling eloquence which so far exceeded the idea of it conveyed by the work in which he published the result of his studies—a work of great merit and

* M. Rio was a literary man of much genius, piety, and enthusiasm. He had been a friend of the Comte de la Ferronnays, and married an English Catholic lady.

value for the history of art, and especially of Italian art—but the pages of which seemed very tame to those who had listened to the burning words which used to fall from his lips.

It was a sort of sermon in its way—that wonderful description of works accomplished by Catholic genius under the influence of the Church, and no doubt suggested many a subject of thought to one who from her earliest days had been attracted towards that living and beautiful Mother, which matures the mind as well as the soul, and kindles the flame of genius as well as the fire of charity.

But this intercourse with congenial friends was not limited to the little circle we have described. It was during that year at Venice that Natalie formed one of those rare friendships which proceed from

purser and higher sources than mere sympathy, and seem more heavenly than earthly in their origin and tendency. The friend who soon became so dear to her—that chosen soul, called like herself to suffer, ascend, and leave all, in order to find all that this world cannot give—was that same young girl upon whom she had made so deep an impression at the time of her short appearance in Vienna. Marie de Bombelles by her name and by her birth belonged to France; but the vicissitudes of emigration had led her father, Count Charles de Bombelles, and his brother Henry,* to Austria, where they had entered the army and remained after the Restora-

* Comte Henri de Bombelles—husband of Miss Fraser, Miana's eldest sister—was tutor to Francis Joseph, present Emperor of Austria, and his unhappy brother, the Emperor Maximilian.

tion. Their father had been French Ambassador at Vienna before the Revolution. His wife—the worthy friend of Madame Elisabeth, and eminently holy like that royal martyr—had died in the flower of her youth, with the most admirable feelings of piety. Up to that moment the Comte de Bombelles had been—like so many men of his generation—perfectly indifferent and careless as to religion; but the sight of that death-bed wrought in his soul something beyond a simple conversion. From that moment he became a fervent Christian, and soon afterwards a holy priest.

After the Restoration he was made Bishop of Amiens. No one who knew, or who even had only seen him, could forget this venerable prelate. The writer of these pages has special reasons for remembering this servant of God, the friend of

her parents, from whom, at the age of eleven, she received her first Communion. The memory of that happy day is ever connected in her mind with the thought of the holy and kind Bishop of Amiens. The holy and sweet expression of his countenance reminded one of the pictures of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Alphonsus Liguori. Without being tall he looked distinguished, and his manners were dignified, but at the same time so simple and playful that children were always attracted to him. Wherever he went he liked to speak to them, to exhort and to bless them. It is not wonderful that those children—for whom his blessing was not only a bishop's but also a grandfather's blessing—became pious and fervent Christians, and that amongst them was found one of those pure flowers which

sometimes spring from an ungenial root, but which seem the natural growth of a soil watered by the dew of Christian virtues.

The grand-daughter of the Bishop of Amiens—that young Marie de Bombelles, whom Natalie met at Vienna—had from her earliest childhood longed for the religious life, and she would have consecrated herself to God at the very outset of her life if her very delicate health had not interfered with that heavenly attraction. Her father's intense affection, which made him object to part with her, raised another obstacle; and, later on,—her aunt, the Comtess Henri de Bombelles, having lost her only daughter at the age of seventeen,—she devoted herself to the broken-hearted mother, who could find no consolation but in her society. Beloved by every member

of her family, she ministered to their comfort and contributed to their happiness whenever recurring illnesses and disabling attacks did not deprive her of all strength. Her father, Count Charles de Bombelles, had been the Chamberlain and faithful friend of Marie Louise of Austria, the widow of the Emperor Napoleon I. It has been said that she was secretly married to him; at any rate he was devoted to her, and never left Parma till she died. Soon after Natalie's arrival at Venice, the Comte de Bombelles brought his daughter there to spend the winter. "It was then that those two souls met" (I quote the words of one who knew them); "souls so sure to understand each other—Marie de Bombelles, an angel of virtue, and as perfect as a human being can be; and Natalie, in all the first fervour of her Catholic life."

We cannot speak much of the first of these two friends ; for in the solitude of the cloister, where God at last allowed her to withdraw, and where she still lives for the happiness and edification of those around her, our words might pain her humility ; but she will, I am sure, bear me out when I state that the hour in which she and Natalie became acquainted was for both of them one of those blessed events in the history of a soul which influences it through life. Physical diseases are easily caught, and good health is, alas, not contagious ; but in the moral order, if on the one hand evil spreads with fearful and often mortal rapidity, opposite influences are no less powerful and efficacious. If evil communications corrupt good habits, on the other hand pure and holy thoughts arise and grow in the mind as we listen to

words which express them, and which flow from the heart of the speaker. And the analogy can be carried further. Bad and dangerous utterances are often whispered into the ear, and wickedness loves mystery and darkness. Holy thoughts and virtuous aims, if at all beyond the common order, are also fond of silence, and shrink from display and noise. We often hear people say that we should shudder did we but know the evil which encompasses us about on every side. It may be so, but is it not likewise true that we should experience a thrill of admiring surprise if we could read the secrets of souls,—and by the side of those abysses of iniquity which men speak of, and into which they too often tempt others to sink, we could see those depths of purity, holiness, and humility, which God's eyes alone can scan?

The pious conversations of the two young girls we have spoken of, served to draw both their hearts nearer to Him. They corresponded with the deep feelings Natalie had often had, and touched a chord in the silent recesses of her soul which hardly seemed quite in keeping with its existing tendencies.

In her character and her heart there was, even at that time, all the energy, courage, and ardent zeal, which belongs to a great love of the poor, and instigates all the works which conduce to their relief. In that respect the spirit of Martha was strong within her, but she had to a still higher degree what we may call the spirit of Mary; that is, a strong attraction to a life of silent contemplation. To remain in profound and speechless repose, with her soul spread out, so to speak, in the

sight of God, and to let that Divine gaze penetrate into the most secret depths of her being, was, as far as words can describe it, Natalie's desire, as it is that of a few chosen souls; and, almost without any explanations, she made Marie de Bombelles understand it. They were both so united in the Divine heart of that Lord they so much loved, that they did not need the aid of language to convey what they both felt. Each of them thought her friend loved God more perfectly than herself, and this belief served to strengthen their mutual affection, their fervour, and their humility.

Reverting to this time, Marie de Bombelles in after-life wrote: "Natalie's influence was so beneficial that when I was with her I felt like a little plant warmed and enlivened by a soft ray of sunshine.

We were constantly together, and people called us the two little sisters. I used to go with her to the meetings where the good Abbé Bianchini—now a Religious—and Don Avogadro—since founder of the Sanctuary of la Salette—used to invite her to help them in instructing children or ignorant adults and converts. I was always by her side at church. She looked there like a flower well suited to it. Her devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was so intense, that after she had been praying for some time before It, every earthly care or thought seemed to vanish from her mind. This was so striking, that one could not help remarking it.”

Marie’s strangely delicate state of health increased in her soul that devotion to contemplation and prayer which she admired in her friend, for an active life was

almost impossible to her. She made most courageous efforts in the way of charity, but they were interrupted by physical weakness. Natalie, on the contrary, was in the full enjoyment of youthful health and strength; and it might not have been, perhaps, altogether desirable for her to give herself up entirely to the charm of so sweet and congenial a friendship and an amount of religious sympathy far beyond what she had ever experienced, if another intimacy, formed at that time, had not at the right moment counterbalanced this tendency, and led her to more active work.

People have thought and said that this new intimacy influenced very decidedly Natalie's decision on the most important question of her life. It may possibly have contributed—as a secondary cause—to lead

her to her ultimate vocation; for Mrs. Neville was a young Englishwoman, recently converted, whose fervent zeal and enthusiastic character was likely to stimulate Natalie's own ardour. But to ascribe to this friendship more than an accidental and remote connection with the deliberate, free, and well-considered decision Natalie subsequently formed, is one of those errors persons are liable to when they judge of things in a cursory and careless manner, and especially those things which of all others require a thorough knowledge, and an attentive appreciation of their bearings.

To speak, however, of Mrs. Neville's real or supposed influence over Natalie would be to anticipate on the future, for no sooner had Mademoiselle Narischkin formed these new intimacies, and secured,

so to say, congenial friends for the winter, than the news arrived that the Emperor of Russia was coming to Italy, and would probably be at Venice by the end of November. At first she did not seem to foresee the great disappointment which this circumstance was about to entail upon her. She does not, at any rate, allude to it in the following letter, written to one of her dearest friends at Naples, whom she had just had the joy of seeing, on her way through Venice :

“ *Venice, October 15th, 1845.*

“ Though I have no news to give you of our little quiet home, I will not miss this post, as my letter may still find you at Florence, where my thoughts have followed you, *con amore*, and where I wish you to hear that I miss you immensely.

The first day after your departure seemed so sad and dull, even in my dear little cell, —and yet you used not to sit with me there. When our hearts feel a void, why do we not really empty them of all earthly attachments? Do you remember that when St. Gertrude asked our Lord what He required of her, His answer was: ‘I require of thee a heart empty of all creatures.’ The fact is, that our hearts are not empty when they feel that void. If they were empty, as they ought to be, we should not grieve so much.

“Do let us try not to love anything but God, and others in Him! Since you went away I have had a good charming letter from dear Miana. She seems to be stronger than she used to be; God grant that this improvement may last! They tell us here that the Emperor of Russia

will arrive at the end of the month. All Venice is excited about it, especially the Archduke and his surroundings.

“The night before last a messenger arrived from Vienna with orders to receive the Emperor with festivities worthy of a sovereign, upon which all the military and civil authorities are exerting themselves, and everything seems to promise that the reception will be very brilliant and magnificent. The Viceroy will come from Milan, and all the beautiful gilded gondolas of the Court will put out to sea in order to receive his Imperial Majesty, who will lodge at the Government House—the Emperor on the first floor, and the Viceroy on the second story. . . .

“I listen with a certain amount of satisfaction to the description of the approaching festivities, foreseeing how

pleasant it will be to escape them. . . .
And now, farewell, my own dear and
excellent friend. I rely on your last
promise, and you can be sure that I
shall not forget mine. 'Iddio ti benedica
sempre.'

"Ever yours,

"NATALIE."

It is evident from this letter that all
she intended to do in consequence of the
Emperor's visit was not to appear at the
fêtes given in his honour,—which would
have only been to continue what had
become her habitual practice with regard
to worldly amusements, except going to
the theatre, which is frequented in Italy
even by persons living in retirement.
Once a week she went to the opera with
her sister. But even this was beginning

to be irksome to her, and she reproached herself in some of her letters for the reluctance with which she submits to what is required of her in that respect.

It might have been supposed that the presence of an inoffensive young girl remaining quietly in her own home, in the town where the Emperor was to stay, would hardly have given him umbrage, but Natalie's friends and relatives deemed it more prudent that she should absent herself from Venice during the time of the Imperial visit.

Natalie was obliged to submit to a decision which seems almost inconceivable, considering that religious liberty, though it does not even now legally exist in Russia, still prevails practically in these days to a degree which makes it difficult to understand the excessive fears which

even reasonable Russians then felt. No doubt that they were owing to the individual character of the Emperor Nicholas, and the violent and morbid irritation which had taken possession of his mind against Catholics, ever since the Polish insurrection.

It was not without regret that Natalie accepted this banishment. Everything at Venice contributed to make her outward existence enjoyable, and she found there also the most inestimable advantages with regard to that inner life of her soul which—unnoticed by others—was daily gaining fresh strength. Her sister Elisabeth too was ailing, and required her care. It was a trial to leave her. She had also ceased to feel that curiosity about new places and sights which would have been gratified by this removal.

It was therefore with some degree of sadness and reluctance that—on the 18th of November of that year, 1845—she started for Vicenza, where she was to spend the time of her absence from Venice. Mrs. Neville and her daughter, a girl of fourteen, went there with her.





CHAPTER VIII.

1846.



THE Emperor's arrival at Venice was delayed, and Natalie had to regret not only her departure but the unnecessary hurry which had attended it. But though saddened by this double disappointment and fear that her sister, though she approved of it, might feel a little renewed bitterness as to the cause of her absence, she gratefully availed herself of the resources afforded her by the kindness of the friends who welcomed her at Vicenza. The Count and Countess Carcano supplied her with every

opportunity of gratifying her tastes and indulging her piety.

The following extracts from her letters will give an idea of the way she spent her time, and of her feelings during this exile :

“ Vicenza, October 29th, 1845.

“ Last night, during Benediction, the dark and devout sanctuary of the Madonna del Monte Bercio looked divinely beautiful. Oh ! why are you not both of you here, far from the slavery of the world and all the social obligations of Venice, and enjoying with me the peace and the inexpressible happiness which can only be found in silence and retirement ! How I longed to be able to transport you here ; but, alas, there are impossible wishes !

“ Thank you very much, Tonnino, for the dear little letter I received from you

yesterday. Do you know that when I heard of the delay in the Emperor's arrival I was almost inclined to go back, but it would have been absurd to reappear for a few days and then depart again, considering I came here only to keep out of his way. The Countess Carcano would not hear of it, and indeed I think she was right, and that it would have been rather inconsistent. But I do long to hear of that arrival, for I am always thinking of you both, and the idea that I could have been useful to Elisabeth just now pains me very much ; I hope, however, that she is better and getting stronger.

“ We had a dinner party yesterday, at half-past one, at the house of the Countess Chirichati, and met four *padri reformati*, two of whom are very well informed, and conversed very pleasantly. The Countess

gave me, after dinner, a magnificent reliquary containing relics of St. Francis of Sales and St. Jane Frances of Chantal. We then paid a visit to the Rambaldos, and went there on foot by so beautiful a road that I do not think I ever saw anything equal to the views both to the right and to the left. Margheritone was once a convent, and there is something bright and yet a little melancholy about it. The crest of the hill is covered with fir trees, which give the scenery a severe and wild appearance that you will guess took my fancy.

“It was reported yesterday that the Emperor had left Palermo on the 21st, that he was to stay four days at Naples, two at Rome, and then proceed to Florence. If these previsions are correct, he is probably there by this time, and must soon arrive at

Venice. On the day he departs we shall leave Vicenza. In the mean time, dear little darling, send me the books I asked for, but not the music. You can be supposed to have forgotten it. It struck me that I should be asked to play before company, and I had rather excuse myself on the plea that I do not know anything by heart; I had rather give up the pleasure of playing when we are alone than to run the risk of being obliged to do so in public, which is what I particularly dread and dislike.

“Do write to me. You do not know all the pleasure it gives me to hear from you. I kiss you both most affectionately. May God bless you, and help us all.”

Four weeks afterwards, on the 29th of December, she writes more sadly, not having heard from her sister, and guessing the reason of her silence :

“My dear friends, I cannot help feeling very sad, for you have left off writing, which looks as if you were angry with me. I am sure you would neither of you have felt this of your own accord, but some charitable souls may have meddled with what was not their business, and excited you against me.

“At any rate, if you are displeased, I hope it is at circumstances over which my will has no control. I had, at least, the pleasure of hearing of you, dear Elisabeth, at the assembly at the Palfi's, and that you had been in the morning to the Giardini with your husband; but I wish you had told me about it—I feel so sad when people ask after you, and I am obliged to say that you have not written to me. What will become of me, my dear ones, if you turn against me?

If you knew all my heart suffers you would be sorry for me. . . . But I ought not, perhaps, to be surprised. There is no unmixed happiness, no uninterrupted peace, no delight without drawback. Oh, when will what is transitory be for ever over? When shall we be where sorrows and crosses do not exist? I know that we must accept them, as they are necessary for our souls, but it is allowable to long for the day when they will be at an end, and we shall be sure of never again displeasing God. . . .

“In spite of everything, I feel it difficult not to be excessively depressed, and yet, having had the happiness of receiving Holy Communion this morning, I try to overcome the pain I feel when day after day the post arrives and brings me no letter from you.

“I kiss you with all my heart, my dear friends, and beg you, at least, to write to me the reason of your silence.”

Elisabeth's affection soon dispelled this cloud, and then Natalie began quietly to enjoy the many sources of interest which Vicenza afforded her; and it was with a degree of regret she would never have, at first, anticipated, that at the end of two months she saw the time arrive for leaving it. She wrote at that moment:

“Vicenza—at the foot of her Monte Bercio—is a perfect little paradise! If you could know what that Sanctuary of the Addolorata has been to us during our stay in this place! All I can say is, that Mrs. Neville and I cried like two little geese when we left it.

“The day before yesterday was the Feast of St. Francis of Sales, and we had a

function at the Visitation which I shall never forget. It is the only day in the year when the heart of their blessed founder is publicly exposed. I kissed it four times with the deepest veneration, in remembrance of the friends who would have rejoiced to do so too. After Mass, the Superioress gave leave to several of the Sisters to sit with us, and I spent a most interesting morning. These good nuns are all so cheerful, so amiable, so pleasing, and some of them so pretty, with their white bands and black veils. Amongst the number there were several Frenchwomen, who have been in Italy since the foundation of their house at Venice. They fled from Lyons, carrying away with them the heart of their holy founder. Their advanced age does not make them at all less attractive. They

are beloved by everybody. I found them so good, so kind, so affectionate. Theirs is a dear order; and after reading the lives of their holy founders, it is difficult not to feel terribly attracted to it."

But in spite of Natalie's tears at leaving Vicenza, and the drawback of not being able to share with her sister the new interests of her life, the joy she felt at returning to Venice was great. Her change of religion, far from diminishing her affection for any of her relatives, seemed to increase it. We see by her letters, that in proportion as she grows more detached from the world, and more indifferent to its pleasures, so does her love for her kindred deepen and expand. In studying her life, we discern two striking facts: first, that the heart is enlarged and warmed by the love of God; and the second, that re-

ligious vocation is not a mere natural attraction nor a resolution which depends on an effort of the mind and the will, but a real and almost irresistible call—not one, however, which it is always easy to obey, or which can be obeyed without suffering.

When we speak of vocation, we imply sacrifice—the sacrifice of something precious and dear. It is in the most intimate and tender depths of the heart that both the altar and the victim are to be found. It is an illusion to suppose that there can be a sacrifice without suffering. It is even a contradiction in terms. But we may add that it is true—miraculous as it may seem—that the suffering of a sacrifice may become, by dint of love, dearer to the soul than happiness itself. We arrive at this knowledge by a careful

study of the spirit of the saints of all ages; and a worthier study it is, for those who care for the interests of humanity, than the more obvious and commonplace effects produced by blind and lawless passions in the hearts which they sway. It is not so easy a one indeed; for to pick up stones on the road is less difficult than to extract diamonds from the mine.

Natalie resumed, in Venice, all the intimate friendships she had formed before her departure—first with Marie de Bombelles and her young cousin, Thérèse, whose early death was so soon to make in that family an irreparable gap; then with Miss Valérie Mogg, whose angelic character, deep piety, and devoted affection to her friends, she deeply appreciated. But, above all, Natalie became more and more intimate with Mrs. Neville, who

then acquired what was called her great influence over her young friend. This influence consisted in helping her to carry on heroic works of charity, in accompanying her to the homes of the poor and the bedsides of the sick in hospitals—in being, like her, devoted and zealous and courageous in doing good.

It is, indeed, possible that Mrs. Neville may have possessed some of the characteristics which are often remarked in persons who have gone through the trials which Protestants seldom escape in England when they embrace Catholicism. Converts, after fighting their way to the truth through long and painful struggles, often evince a strength of faith and an ardent zeal, edifying and astonishing to Catholics born and brought up in the Church, and accustomed from their earliest

days to the spiritual blessings which their new brethren have often bought at the price of their whole earthly happiness—we might almost say by the sacrifice of their hearts' life-blood. After winning, at such a cost, peace, and the soul's true happiness, they are seized with an impetuous desire to persuade those they love and have left behind, outside the Church, to avail themselves of the blessings so dearly bought, so intensely valued. Their souls burn with a zeal not often found amongst those who from their birth have quietly possessed those priceless gifts. They also feel a singular bitterness against the authors of the so-called Reformation, who, by their apostasy of the sixteenth century, bequeathed to their descendants the necessity of such desperate struggles to return to the true Church, and reconquer truths hid

from their faith for three hundred years. This bitterness extends to the whole system inaugurated by that guilty generation; and they express their sense of it in a stronger manner than the descendants of those faithful Catholics who have received from their ancestors the sacred heritage of truth, and the tradition of a fidelity and loyalty tried so deeply and so long, that they scarcely complain of any hardships now, and are more inclined to extol the actual justice of their countrymen.

But whether or not Mrs. Neville had any tendency to that spirit of exaggeration sometimes noticed in converts, there can be no doubt that her piety was deep and sincere, and her charity and zeal indefatigable. Natalie had the opportunity of studying in her two friends the different ways which she was called jointly to

follow—that of meditation and that of action. And what does meditation mean? It means, in reality, to think—to think with intensity, under the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit sincerely and earnestly sought for.

To think of God and His works, of Jesus Christ and His life, to follow the steps of our Lord on earth, to listen to His words—above all, to contemplate His sufferings. But all have not received from God, in an equal degree, the gift of concentrating every power of thought on the subject chosen for the food of their souls. To some the effort is impossible, to most persons difficult. To whatever degree it is attainable, nothing can be more salutary than this employment of the intellectual faculties.

But there are souls—few though they

be—to whom this action of the mind is almost as easy as flight to a bird, who find rest and sweetness and joy in this inward concentration and that upward motion. Natalie was one of those in whom the supernatural gift of prayer was seconded by a natural tendency to recollection, and a lively imagination matured and disciplined by an over-ruling rectitude. Never do we find that at any time of her life—not in childhood, or youth, or under the most worldly influences—was her mind stirred in its pure depths by thoughts which imagination multiplies, colours, and distorts. Of all natural gifts the most dangerous,—and sometimes the most precious, according to the use which is made of it—this faculty can be a great hindrance, or a powerful assistance, to meditation. A dissipated mind and un-

controlled imagination will be a bar to its exercise, but under subjection, and well regulated, it may become the useful hand-maid of prayer and pious thought. It places before the mental sight those images which the soul seeks to dwell upon, and the more lively its action the more help will be derived from it.

Natalie had early acquired habits of thought, which prepared, as it were, her mind for the gift of mental prayer with which she was, later on, so remarkably endowed. Every morning, after Mass, she devoted a long time to this exercise, which she practised without effort, probably assisted by thoughts suggested in the pious conversations she so often held with Marie de Bombelles. It was, at any rate, from these meditations that her soul derived the strength, courage, and zeal,

which she afterwards evinced in her visits to the sick poor, and the hospitals, where day after day she went with Mrs. Neville, whom she was in the habit of calling her little mother. She had by this time arrived at the exact and devout practice of every precept of the Catholic religion, and had learnt by experience all the peace, strength, and sweetness derived from their perfect accomplishment; but this knowledge and this joy were gradually leading her still further. She began to discover and to understand a still higher life, and to turn towards it with keen aspirations.

The Church lays upon all her children the obligation of obeying her precepts; but there are counsels only meant for a few chosen souls. Natalie began to turn her whole attention to this subject; and the noblest of all ambitions, that of perfection—

or in other words, of a nearer, closer, and more intimate union with Jesus Christ—made her long for the complete sacrifice which alone can quench that sacred thirst which, holy and mysterious as it is, may be subject to illusions—for on those sublime heights a soul can easily deceive itself. The world little knows with what hesitating prudence these high aspirations are tested by those whom it so often accuses of unscrupulously prompting and stimulating them, and multiplying as much as possible, at all times and in all places, the number of these votaries.

But if, on the one hand, the authorities of the Church are slow to admit the existence of such a vocation, and that to a degree which is often a great trial for the soul which longs to embrace it; on the other hand, the Church can never admit

that our Lord has uttered unmeaning words, and that whilst the precepts of His law are binding, the counsels He has likewise given have no sense or meaning. It believes and it teaches, in the most positive manner, that the perfection which the Divine Master recommends to some chosen souls is really their vocation, and it takes as much pains to discern it when genuine as to discard it if unreal.

Natalie had to satisfy herself and others, and especially her spiritual guides, as to this point; and in the mean time she continued to follow her usual mode of life, and apparently to enjoy as much as ever the society of her intimate friends and of some other acquaintances she had made at Venice. The Duchesse de Berry often invited her to the Vendramini Palace, and she always preserved a grateful recollection of

the kindness shown her by that Princess and her daughter, the Duchess of Parma. But in her letter at that time we find signs of the increasing impatience with which she endured the chains that still bound her to the world. To her dearest friend she wrote:

“My soul feels keenly the intolerable weight it abhors. Too keenly, I fear, for it makes it lose the merit of an entire conformity with God’s will. All this vanishes, or ought to vanish, when I think of the position of my poor sister Catherine. How often I bless God that He preserved me from a danger which might have proved too great for my weakness! How good and wise He is in all His ways, and admirable in the action and operation of His Providence! Poor Catherine!—I feel so much for her now; and so much the greater will be my joy, when with the

help of God and the Blessed Virgin her struggles will end in victory. Sometimes, even whilst I pity her, I almost envy her cross; for, after all, to suffer for the love of God is a greater grace than any enjoyment. Why did I not feel this enough when I too had something to suffer and to offer up?

“But I am talking foolishly, or else, if such are my thoughts, I ought to unsay what I wrote just now about the trouble with which I endure the yoke still laid upon me. I must gladly accept everything that happens to me. Yes, I will do so, my dear little friend, if God will give me strength for it. Pray to Him for me.

“I wish you now all the joys of Easter, as I shall not write to you again till then. It is a holy time we have just

been spending, and I regret that it is over. Father Curci is indeed a saint, and you may well envy us the privilege of hearing his instructions. Mrs. Neville and I have been sometimes to see him, and he received us with the greatest kindness and charity. We wish he was not going away; but there are always thorns in this world, and the sharpest are those continual separations. . . . Oh, Sache!* what heart-yearnings it gives me when you speak of the probability of seeing me one day wearing a cornette! Oh, no!—that beautiful, touching, and noble vocation is not meant for me. There is no doubt that a cloistered life has attractions which the soul can scarcely fathom. But in everything, ‘Fiat.’ Let us follow the most perfect example of submission that

* The Russian diminutive of the name of Alexandra.

ever was given, and which the Church commemorates to-day." *

Later on she wrote : " As to Catherine, I very much hope that she will one day listen to the sweet voice which for so many years has called her. How can we resist that urgent voice ? It leaves us at last no rest and no ease. Oh, how well that God who thus speaks to our hearts knows how to encompass us about on every side ! He lays siege to our souls, and we feel that we must surrender. I am sure He will, one day, make Himself Master of my dear sister's whole heart."

Natalie persisted in her endeavours to accept, with apparent serenity, the exterior life she was obliged to lead. The irksome side of it was relieved by the society of

* The Feast of the Annunciation.

her dear and intimate friends. Towards the end of her stay in Venice, she wrote :

“ To our great regret, the Rios are gone to Gastein. We had become very intimate, meeting every day, and often spending whole days together. Marie remains here till the 9th of September. She is as sweet, as dear, as gentle, as affectionate, and as pious as ever, and she is very fond of Mrs. Neville, whom she calls her Jane Frances of Chantal. Thérèse has also been delighted and edified with her. She is herself a charming little person, whom we shall always think of with the greatest regard. We have all been very fond of one another, and it has been a very agreeable time. We go on spending the greatest part of our mornings together, and then have our little meetings at Madame Melatesta's, with the humble, saintly

Anna Marovitch.* It is difficult to conceive so much greatness of soul under such a modest and timid appearance."

But under all this smooth exterior, Natalie's soul was every day more strongly possessed by that stern love of sacrifice which cannot content itself with any worldly admixture. We cannot exactly point to the day and the hour when these thoughts first found utterance in words, and she gave others to understand what was the resolution she was about to take; but it was probably towards the end of the spring of 1846, after she had spent several months in the assiduous practice

* Anna Marovitch was a modest and pious person, whose reputation extended all over the north of Italy, though her family was obscure, and that she tried to hide herself from everybody. But in spite of these efforts, her virtues and her writings had given her a certain celebrity. It was the venerable D. Daniell Canale who had made Natalie acquainted with her.

of mental prayer and the most active exercise of works of charity.

It is not to be wondered at that, at the first moment, her brother and her sisters strongly opposed her intention, and used every effort in their power to induce her to give it up. One of the greatest trials which those have to encounter who are called to make this great sacrifice is the sorrow it occasions to others. If this is the case, even in families united in the same faith and the most perfect religious sympathy, it must necessarily be ten times more painful when such is not the case, and there is nothing to counteract the suffering of such a separation.

What Natalie went through during that sad interval which seemed to divide her past from her future life, we could easily have guessed, even if her letters had

not frequently expressed it in the most touching manner. It is at that time chiefly that we find in them outpourings of the strongest affection for her relatives. She seems to love them more and more as the great love which embraces all other affections reigns supremely in her heart, extinguishing or destroying nothing but evil, or the least taint of it, in the soul.

In August, 1846, the Baroness de Petz went away for a little while, leaving Natalie at Venice. She was then under the first painful impressions which her sister's resolution had produced in her mind, and by no means resigned to its accomplishment. Nothing was changed, however, in the mutual affection between them, nor was there any reserve as to the subject so deeply interesting to both. This is evinced by the following letter :

“ Venice, August 23rd, 1846.

“ Thank you a thousand times, dearest Elisabeth, for your charming little letter. I wished to answer it yesterday, but found it impossible. It is nice and dear of you to tell me that you felt a little regret at leaving me even for a few days. I felt it very much also, but I try to be courageous, and overcome as much as I can this excessive sensibility. As to that other separation, which I do not know why you should consider as an eternal one, it is not as easy to me, as you suppose, to bear the thoughts of it; but I look upon it as a sacrifice—first, in expiation of my faults, and then, of thanksgiving for God’s mercies. He has been so good to me that I cannot help feeling it to the very depths of my heart, and my most ardent desire is in some way or other to evince my love and

my gratitude. I know that He is not in need of what I can give, but I want to pay something of the great debt I owe to Him by making the greatest sacrifice in my power, not only that of my heart, but of my mind, my liberty, my will, my strength, my health,—in short, everything belonging to me which can be used for His service and greater glory. It is this thought which gives so much merit to the vows which are made by those who embrace the religious life. The affections which bind them to the loved ones they leave are not broken by this separation. This would be impossible, and it is not required; there would then be no merit in the sacrifice. But God, who is all love, and a jealous God as to the affections of our hearts, does not forbid us to love His creatures, but only

to love them more than Him. And I assure you that in the lives of holy people, who have lived in religion, there are innumerable instances of the most touching love and constant solicitude for those they left behind them in the world, when they gave themselves to God.

“ Everything is sanctified by the religious vows which, far from destroying the affections God Himself has implanted in our hearts, impart to them an increase of strength and depth.

“ With regard to that subject of vocation, let me copy for you a passage from St. Lawrence Giustiniani's writings. ‘ If everybody knew the happiness of the religious state, such numbers would betake themselves to that mode of life that the continuance of the human race would be

arrested; Divine Providence hides it from the multitude, and it is to them an enigma which only a few can understand.'

"To me, I assure you that the religious life seems paradise on earth, and I cannot bless God enough that He has given me to see it. My greatest sacrifice—and God knows it and takes account of it—is the sorrow I cause you, dearest Elisabeth. But I hope that soon our dear Mary* will come and fill up my place in your house, where you would otherwise so much miss me. Do we not see in this a proof of God's goodness, and how His Providence arranges everything for the best? Till then, however, you ought to make a nice little act of virtue and generosity, by telling God that you accept this trial, and

* Her sister.

then try not to think of it, and to go on as usual with your occupations and your amusements, and you may be certain that God will reward you for this sacrifice. The great advantage of dealing with our good God is, that He always pays us a hundred-fold, or more, for whatever we do for Him, and thus we lay up treasures for eternity. Do not, then, give way to grief, and make courageously your little act of offering.

“I speak in this way because I have already had experience of some of these things, but you will see by the style of my letter that they flow from my heart, and only from my heart. And now, farewell, dear Tonnino, and dear Elisabeth, whom I love, and kiss with the greatest affection.

“NATALIE.”

Her sister may have thought some passages in this letter strange and exaggerated, and perhaps some of my readers will be of the same opinion, and will pronounce upon them one of those hasty judgments the world so carelessly utters. But we, who have seen Natalie realize in the most faithful manner during a long course of years the idea of the religious life, such as her fervour had pictured it in these lines,—we could not transcribe them without feelings of mingled admiration and emotion.





CHAPTER IX.

NATALIE'S mind was made up by this time, but only on one point, that of consecrating herself entirely to God in the religious life; but she was in no hurry to act. The end in view was clear to her, but she was still uncertain how to arrive at it. Like a traveller who knows where he is bound to, but not the name or the form of the ship which is to convey him to his destination, she was determined to be a nun, but she had no marked preference for any particular order. In all of them there is a surrender of everything for God, and that

was all she cared for. We have seen, in one of her letters, that she thought there was something *terribly* attractive in the Visitation, and, in another, that she felt deeply touched by the supposition that she would one day be a Sister of St. Vincent of Paul, and declared that this was too high and sublime a vocation for her. Then, again, she frequented at that time one of the houses of the Order of St. Dorothea,* one very little known except

* This Order, founded in the beginning of this century by the Count Abbé Luca Passi, is devoted to the education of poor children, and placed by its holy founder under the invocation of St. Dorothea, a martyr of the fourth century.

We read in the acts of her martyrdom, related by the Bollandists, that when she was on her way to execution, the pagan Procurator, Theophilus, jeeringly told her to send him fruits and flowers from the garden of her Heavenly Spouse. Dorothea promised she would. As she was bending down to receive the death-stroke, she saw approaching her a child who carried in his

in Italy, and she was struck with the charm of this convent and the sanctity of its inmates. She was, in fact, equally pleased in all these sacred abodes, because in all of them she found examples of the two lives which equally attracted her—contemplative and active—and where one of them preponderated the other was not excluded.

Unlike many other persons, called like her to the religious life, Natalie was not more decidedly attracted to one than the other of these lives, and was as much inclined to enter a contemplative as an

hand a basket containing fruit and beautiful roses. She sent the child and the flowers to Theophilus, who became at once a Christian, and joyfully submitted to martyrdom. St. Dorothea was a native of Cesarea, in Cappadocia, and martyred in that city. The Greeks have, however, forgotten her name, which has been piously preserved in the most ancient Latin Martyrology.

active order. This is not the case in most vocations. Just as two flowers gathered off the same tree, and whose shape, colour, and scent may be identical, are yet never exactly alike, so is there a tangible difference between souls called to a high perfection. They do not all understand that Divine language in the same way; and even with regard to a particular soul, it varies sometimes according to time and circumstances and its powers of comprehension. We may quote in support of this assertion words from the pen of one more authorized than we are to speak on such a subject:

“The ways of God in drawing souls to Himself are as various as they are wonderful, nor does He always use the same way at different times with the same soul. To some it is a suggestion implied

in a disclosure of His beneficence, mercy, or greatness; some external incident or visitation, or personal deliverance or mercy; or something which strikes the soul almost into the dust with the conviction of its danger and need of help; speaks to it in the words of St. John, 'Behold the Lamb of God,' or forces upon it the necessity of looking into the truths which concern salvation,—as if He said, 'Come and see, come and make trial of what is here offered to you, if you will accept it.' Others are led by example or personal testimony of those whom they love and respect, as when Andrew said to Simon, 'We have found the Messiah.' For others, God almost takes the whole burthen on Himself, and moves their heart so powerfully, perhaps at the same time giving them some powerful outward call, as to St. Matthew or St.

Paul, that they are almost unable to resist it; and with some it is as if He sought them and found them, and said to them, 'Follow me.' The vocation is the same to all, though the method be different, and in all God does no violence to the human will, which may yet turn away, if it so chooses, from all these gracious ways which God has contrived for its salvation."†

* * * * *

We cannot say of Natalie, like of the great Saints quoted in this passage, that God took "the whole burthen on Himself," but we may assert that He made use of everything, of every incident and every circumstance of her life, of every joy and every sorrow, of every friendship

† Father Coleridge's *Public Life of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Vol. I., chap. ix., page 126.

and every disappointment. Not one of these but had its share in revealing to her the reality of that appeal which never was more promptly urgent than when she tried to resist it.

But that period of struggle was over. Her resolution to enter the religious life had already been known some months to her family, when towards the end of 1846, her brother, M. Alexander Narischkin, arrived at Venice. His opposition from the first had been less strenuous than that of her sisters, and after he had seen and conversed with Natalie he ceased to feel any irritation on the subject. Still he was anxious to postpone her decision, and proposed to her with that view to visit Rome with him. But he soon perceived that nothing would be gained by this delay, and that it would be better not to

grieve his sister by useless opposition. He therefore contented himself with asking her to choose amongst the Catholic religious orders the one he himself preferred, probably the only one he knew.

She would have been inclined to agree to his wishes, whatever had been his choice, but when he named the Order of the Sisters of Charity, her own dear daughters of St. Vincent of Paul, she felt that he was forestalling her dearest desire. It was, however, agreed upon between them that nothing would be decided until, after a careful examination of her own soul, and in the opinion of those whom she would consider the most competent advisers in such a question, she was found worthy and capable of embracing so high a vocation. The holy and admirable Father Aladel, with whom she had continued to

correspond, had indeed always encouraged her to think of it; but Natalie's humility stood in the way of the joy which this idea would have given her. In one of her letters to the good missionary she says: "Can I indeed aspire to the happiness of belonging only to God?—of being associated with those who have never lived in error, and to be united to them in all their works of charity. I secretly felt this desire, but I did not venture to indulge it, but rather looked on this thought as a presumptuous one, and yet you tell me to hope for so great a blessing. Then do let me know how I ought to proceed in order to arrive at this highest object of my wishes. It is indeed the life of the Sisters of Charity I long for, and it is with them that I should like to devote myself to the service of the poor. It is quite true that this is the voca-

tion which most attracts me, but at the same time it is also true that I feel myself quite unworthy of it."

These scruples did not long detain Natalie. But if, on the one hand, the way seemed to become easier to her, one after the other a succession of sorrows saddened the short time she had still to spend with her relatives, and made her feel so many and such different emotions, that they seemed to have been purposely intended to make her feel the whole extent of her affection for those she was about to leave, and the strength of the earthly ties she was about to give up for God.

In the first place, her sister Elisabeth's child died suddenly in the midst of all the rejoicings at its birth. Then she heard that Valerie Mogg was dying at Milan, where she had gone with M. and Madame

Rio, and soon afterwards came the news of the death, at Vienna, of the young and charming Thérèse de Bombelles, the cousin of her dear friend Marie. And lastly, her beloved *little mother*, Mrs. Neville, was most dangerously ill at Venice. As the letters which refer to the illness and death of her sister's child and the recovery of Mrs. Neville are very interesting, and amongst the last which Natalie wrote before leaving the world, we transcribe them here :

“ *Venice, November 23rd, 1846.*

“ An instant has been enough, my dear friend, to make us pass, after twenty-four hours of joy, five days of sorrow and anxiety, to which were added the suffering of having to play a part in the presence of poor Elisabeth, who does not yet know her misfortune. That child was really as

beautiful as an angel, and that on the second day of its life, which I am told is not generally the case. I really never saw a more lovely little face. We were all saying that he was too perfectly beautiful for this world, and that God would make of him either an angel or a saint, and now he has actually taken his place amongst those who surround our Lord's throne in heaven, and shares the celestial glory of the angels in paradise. Yesterday he died. The doctor had fortunately thought of having him moved into my room before his sufferings had begun, and so poor Elisabeth did not witness them. She had submitted with a breaking heart to her husband's wishes, and in every way her gentleness and obedience have been very touching. We nursed and watched that precious treasure day and night; I with more than

an aunt's affection—all of us with the tenderest and saddest feelings. You can imagine how great our anxiety became when the danger increased. At last all our illusions vanished like a dream; God has taken to Himself this dear little one."

"Friday 27th.

"I have found it impossible to finish this letter till to-day. . . . Our poor Elisabeth knows it all now. She heard of this affliction with great gentleness and resignation, and the doctor is better satisfied with her state than he had ventured to hope. How God helps us in everything! But another event of a different sort is breaking our hearts, knowing as you did our dear Valerie, and loving her as much as I do, you will feel it very much. On

the 19th, the Feast of St. Elisabeth of Hungary, poor Madame Rio wrote to us, in the deepest anguish, that there was no hope for the life of that angel. On the 6th she had fallen ill with a fever, and on the 19th was dying. She had received Holy Communion that day and commended herself to our prayers. You may easily imagine the intense grief of the good Rios. I send you their letter that you may pray for them all.

“My dear Mrs. Neville is also confined to her bed, and during the last week has been very ill. Sophy Greville—I suppose you know who I mean—died the other day, in Scotland. God has speedily rewarded her faith and her piety. She had not yet had the courage to break to her family that she was a Catholic, and God in his mercy spared her the struggle she

had so much dreaded. Oh, let us always bless Him, dearest Sache! How we ought always to pray to be grateful!—grateful to a degree that absorbs every other feeling!

“All the La Ferronnays have returned to Paris. Alexandrine went to Stuttgart, and has met there Marie and my poor dear Catherine. Oh, may God lead her onward! Perhaps she will come to Venice if I go away. We may be sure that our good God will ordain everything for the best. My brother is very kind to me; he wanted me to go with him to Rome for the holy week, and he offers to take me, next year, to Paris. I leave all the future in God’s hands; I only wish to know what is His will, and am ready to accept it according to the judgment of those who have authority to speak on that subject.

“Father Farrari is making his retreat, and he will bear my future in mind. Afterwards he will see my brother, and then everything will be settled. Pray that I may be myself thoroughly resolved to accept everything.

“My dear, darling friend. I kiss you with the tenderest feelings.

“NATALIE.”

Sophy Greville! I was surprised to find that name in the letter I have just transcribed, but as a remembrance dear to my heart has thus been unexpectedly recalled, I may be perhaps excused for interrupting a moment the course of this history to say a few words about this departed friend.

It is now thirty years since she died. This long lapse of time has softened, it

may be hoped, the displeasure her relatives felt when, after her death in 1846, they discovered by her papers that a few months previously she had been received into the Catholic Church, at Baden. The resentment which could not be directed against her whom death had removed from this world, was strongly directed against the two friends who had been present at her abjuration, and whom her parents supposed to have been accessaries to her change of religion. Now, after so long a lapse of time, I may be allowed, without fear of wounding or grieving her family, to say a few words about her conversion.

When, in 1844, I made acquaintance with Miss Sophy Greville, she had already been for many years longing to be a Catholic. To her intimate friends, and especially to the Grand Duchess Stephanie

of Baden, with whom she had spent from childhood the greatest part of her life, this desire was well known. But she knew that the Grand Duchess, to whom she had been entrusted by her parents, was on that account in a delicate position with regard to her, and found it difficult to second her wishes without appearing to betray their confidence. She had therefore resolved, whenever an opportunity presented itself, and she could summon up sufficient courage, to act so as not to commit her royal friend's responsibility. It was long before the day and the hour she was watching for, arrived.

In 1846, towards the end of the summer, the Princess Marie of Baden, then Marchioness of Douglas and now Dowager-Duchess of Hamilton, and at that time a Protestant, was about to return to Scot-

land after a stay of some months in Baden. Sophy Greville was to accompany her to spend the rest of the autumn at her home in the country, and then pay a visit to her own parents. It was not the first time that she was leaving the Grand Duchess, to whom she was most tenderly attached, and her absence was not to be longer than usual. Still she felt this time an insurmountable desire to accomplish before her departure the act she had so long wished to accomplish, and to become a Catholic in reality, as she had long been one in heart. I was staying at that time in Baden, and Alexandrine was with me. She asked us to advise her, and we felt somewhat in doubt what to say.

She was twenty-six years of age, so that on such a subject she was certainly free to act on her own convictions. She

had long been separated from her family and, as it were, adopted by a French Catholic Princess, who though she did not feel herself at liberty to promote her change of religion, would not, of course, object to it. At the same time, we did not think it a well-chosen moment for so important a proceeding. It so happened that Baden was that year even more full of bustle and excitement than usual. Sophy Greville filled, in some sense, the position of the Grand Duchess's lady-in-waiting, and the Princess was always anxious to have her with her when she received company, for her beauty—the most perfect ever seen—made her the ornament of all the *fêtes*, and a general object of admiration.

She cared very little for that wonderful beauty of hers. There was something grave, serious, and almost sad in her

countenance. A vague presentiment of her early death may have inspired this depression, and also led her to persist in the resolution of hastening the act she had in view, and in spite of every obstacle to accomplish it on the last day but one she spent at Baden.

There was to be that day a long drive in the afternoon, and a grand party in the evening. Sophy was obliged to join in all this dissipation; but she contrived to secure two hours towards the close of the day, when she made her escape, and came alone to the little Church of the Convent of the Sepulchre, where we had promised to meet her.

There we saw her kneel before the altar, where she was conditionally baptized, and then received into the Church. Never can the remembrance of that sight fade

away from my mind: those beautiful eyes bent down, that lovely complexion, the outline of that matchless face, that perfect figure, and the beauty of the soul in such rare and wonderful harmony with that of the body. How little we thought, as we gazed at her with admiration and emotion during that hour stolen from the gay world, that it was so soon to be followed by the day which was to open to her the gates of eternity!

Forty-eight hours afterwards she left Baden, and as she passed through Paris went to confession and made her first Communion. It was her viaticum; for as soon as she arrived at Brodick Castle, in the Isle of Arran, she fell ill with typhoid fever, and died in a few days, deprived of all outward religious assistance—for in Arran there was neither Catholic chapel nor priest

—but sustained by the graces which God Himself gives to those to whom human ministrations are denied.

She rests on that wild sea-shore; and when, many years afterwards, I visited her tomb, the memory of that gentle and courageous soul remains in my mind like a dear and beautiful vision of the past, and it is with a sweet and blessed confidence that my thoughts follow her beyond the grave.





CHAPTER X.

1847.

AFTER a digression—which the mention of a familiar and much-loved name in Natalie's letters seemed to justify—I return to her own history, and the circle of friends she loved so well :

“ Venice, February 12th, 1847.

“ It is a month, dear friend, since I received your last letter, and I have not been able to find time to answer it. You will not resent it, I know, when I tell you that, between my brother and my dear Mrs. Neville, who cannot yet leave her bed, I have been fully employed.

“She had received, a fortnight ago, permission to have Mass said in her room, and for the first time this took place on the Feast of St. Francis of Sales. It was, as you may well imagine, a great day for her, and she made an effort to get up—but alas! it was too soon, and she became much worse, so much so that the day you wrote to me was one of great trial for us all. She was seized with a virulent fever, and for some hours we feared that she would be taken from us. But God had pity on the intense grief of all those who had learnt to appreciate her, and especially on her poor child, and He vouchsafed to hear the prayers which her numberless friends addressed to Him day and night. I do not think there is a single convent in Venice, and even in all Italy, where her recovery was not ardently solicited: the

Nuns of the Visitation; the Daughters of St. Francis of Assisi; all the Jesuits at Venice, at Parma; the Sisters, the Ursulines, and the Nuns of the Sacred Heart at Vicenza; the Servites of Monte, at Bergamo; the Benedictines and the Dominicanesses—in short, everywhere in all these Italian towns which she had visited in her travels. God had given her friends who, in these days of sadness and anxiety, offered—to obtain her cure—their fasts, their watches, their mortifications, and their prayers. I assure you that it was very touching to see so many messengers arriving from all those religious houses to enquire after her. The holy founders and patron saints of all those different orders were indeed fervently invoked in those days of alarm. . . . The good Jesuit Fathers here, who are quite angels of compassion in such terrible mo-

ments, spared neither prayers, encouragements, nor consolations. At last our fears for her were a little quieted, when we received a heart-breaking letter from Miana Fraser, asking earnestly for our prayers—but alas! it was too late; and even whilst we prayed, a secret presentiment made us offer up those prayers for the soul, as well as the body, of dearest little Teresa.

“On the following day a second letter announced to us the terrible news of the poor Bombelles’ loss. Oh, my dear little Sache, how mysterious are the ways of God’s providence! Teresa’s poor mother has not yet been able to shed a tear since the hand of God, merciful even when it strikes, has so severely tried her. One can easily conceive their excessive grief. That dear child was beloved by everybody. We are all in great grief at her death, but

one cannot speak of one's own sorrow, with the thought of what her father and mother are suffering!—and Mita * and Miana, we feel so much for them, though those dear good souls forget themselves to think only of their sister.

“In the midst of all this sadness, Valérie—who was dying, and received the last Sacraments a few days ago—seems to revive, and my dear Mrs. Neville also. Oh! who would ever have thought that that charming Teresa, who seemed the picture of health, would die before them, and that Miana and Marie, both so delicate, would also survive her.

“One cannot feel enough that the human mind cannot fathom the secrets of God's ways! . . . I do not know what to tell

* The Marchesa Gargallo, third sister of the Comtesse de Bombelles.

you about Catherine—I am always thinking of her, and painfully too—for I know well what she is going through. Oh, if she could know what she loses, and what she could so easily secure!

“My dear little Sache, let us thank God for all His graces, and try to be very faithful to Him. Farewell, I love you most dearly.

“NATALIE.”

“*Venice, Thursday, April, 1847.*

“In vain have I tried during the last fortnight to find time to write to you; the occupations of these solemn days of holy week left me no leisure, and yet I had some very interesting news to tell you about my dear sick friend, who had been much worse again since my last letter. Two days after I wrote to you her state became so alarming, and all the symptoms of decline began to be so evident, that the

doctor declared that he did not believe that any remedies could arrest it. You may imagine the consternation of all her friends. She was decidedly in a consumption, and gradually sinking. All hope seemed at an end. Our anxious hearts clung to the idea of a miracle. Late one evening I had been reading the account of three wonderful graces of this sort obtained through the intercession of the Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. I said to myself that if I had a lively faith I should begin a Novena, but *that it was too late*; the illness was too advanced, and it was true that she was in a state of complete prostration, unable to digest any food—and on the evening of the 23rd, the doctor pronounced her case to be quite hopeless, and said it was useless to continue his visits. . . . On the 24th, at nine o'clock in the morning—I had not yet

gone out—a gondola stopped at our door. Stephanie Neville rushed breathless into my room, and implored me to come down immediately. She had something to show me, which she could not bring up-stairs.

“I followed her, and found—. . . what do you think I found in the gondola?—my dearest little mother, miraculously cured, and coming full of the deepest emotion to announce it to her great daughter! This favour had been obtained on the tomb of St. Méchitar, at the Convent of St. Lazarus, where she had asked to be carried. All the details you will hear when you come to Venice. I write these few lines only to make you more impatient to be with us. I long for that moment, and hope you will be able to give us a good many hours. Soon we shall meet—what a delightful thought! May God ever bless you.

“N.”

This book is meant for Catholic readers, amongst whom I may safely conclude there will be no disposition to disbelieve or cavil at the statement of this miraculous event. But even, if this book is to be read by others, I do not see why I should hesitate to mention so remarkable a fact, attested as it is by one of the most truthful persons I ever met with, and the circumstances of which preclude any supposition of mistake or delusion. Nothing could even suggest such a silence, except the well-known habit of mind which exists in the world—rejecting, against every law of justice and history, all testimony tending to a practical evidence that God is the Sovereign Lord of nature. Strange infatuation indeed which leads Christians—for I speak of those who admit the authority of Holy Scripture—to deem it impossible that a

relic, that is to say some portion of the mortal remains of a servant of God, can operate miracles such as those which God permitted *the shadow of* St. Peter's body to accomplish in the presence of an assembled multitude.

Every one has, of course, a right to doubt as to the truth of a particular miracle, and it is a duty not to yield too easy a belief to such statements. Hesitation is right, investigation desirable, and any one may be justified in saying such and such a fact is not true—but how can Christians say such a fact is not possible?

People answer, I know, that there are often false miracles. We do not deny it—we even admit that, to a certain degree, Catholics are in danger of being thus deceived. The owners of valuable diamonds are liable to be deceived as to the

genuineness of some of their possessions. Not so the individual who never has had anything to do with precious stones. The former, however, are tolerably keen-sighted as to their purchases, and a man would be laughed at who renounced all his treasures from the fear of an accidental deception.

The time which followed Mrs. Neville's illness and her recovery proved the most painful and trying of Natalie's life. The hour of separation was drawing near, and God only knows what she suffered in parting with all those she loved.

Her brother had preceded, instead of taking, her to Paris, but it was arranged that she was to stay with him when she arrived there. It was thought, perhaps, that that stay would be prolonged; and notwithstanding the openness with which she had spoken to her relatives, they may have

indulged a hope that she was not leaving them for ever. Not that the measures she had taken previously to her departure justified such an expectation, but those not intimately acquainted with the work which had been going on for two years in her soul, probably imagined that her resolution was not irrevocable; they may even have fancied that the very sight of Paris would modify her inclinations, and that she would hesitate before exchanging the gay world for a religious house.

Natalie did not take pains to undeceive them, even after the 18th of December, 1847—the day on which this final separation took place at Venice. What was to her the anguish of this parting will be seen in the following letters. A month afterwards she wrote :

“I will not speak of my weakness at

the moment of that great separation, the only sacrifice which has really cost me anything. I felt that inward conviction which tells us that we are really doing God's will, and yet that we are quite free and acting voluntarily, but my heart seemed rent and breaking into pieces."

In these words she seems unconsciously to express the same thought which we find in the following passage of St. Augustine:

"Give me, my God, by love of Thee, the will to despise all other love, and by Thy sufferings the will to bear every suffering."

These strong feelings of tenderness, these regrets, and at the same time that determination of the will in apparent contradiction with them, and surmounting them all, are found in every one of her letters to her sister after their parting. We see in

them also the affectionate desire to console and cheer her in every possible way, and to try to prevent her missing her too much. We can follow her step by step during this journey, and witness the emotions of the days which preceded the decisive moment when she entered on her new destiny, and began her life of order, peace, and obedience.

The following note was given to her sister after her departure, which seems to have been so arranged as to spare her the anguish of a final farewell :

“MY DEAR, *dear* ELISABETH,

“I need not tell you that it is with a breaking heart I leave you. No one knows what I have suffered during these days of constraint and effort, during which I used often to keep out of the way to hide my tears. No one knows what I suffer in thinking of what you will now hear, but

God takes account of it all: without that thought I must have given way. You will perhaps be surprised that I did not try to be more with you and enjoy your society during those last days, but I felt that I might break down, and would have broken down if I had done so. For God's sake, and for the sake of your love for your husband, and also from affection for me, do not grieve too vehemently over my departure. You will see, later on, how happy I shall be (I cannot say that I feel happy just now); but make, on your side, this sacrifice to God, and be sure that it will bring its reward. The only thing that can console me for having left you in this way will be to hear *as soon as possible* that you are reasonable, and that you accept distractions. I beg you to do so, dearest Elisabeth, in the name of all whom you most

care for. Do not, at this last moment, refuse me that consolation. I cannot express what my heart feels for you—for both of you. God grant that it may not be in vain for your future welfare, which will be henceforward my most constant solicitude. May God bless you both! I cannot write any more, I really have not strength to do so. Oh, give me the consolation of knowing that you do not grieve too much—that your health does not suffer! Farewell, my dear ones! Once more, may God bless you!

“NATALIE.”

Natalie was accompanied in this journey by a confidential friend of the Narischkin family, Mademoiselle Alexandrine Zamiatine. She did not enter thoroughly into the feelings of her young companion, but she was much attached to her, and had

willingly consented to travel with her to Paris. She did not leave Natalie till the day when the latter entered as a postulant the house of the Sisters of Charity at Montrouge:

“ Padua, 5th. October.

“We are stopping at Padua for two hours. My dear friends, my heart and my thoughts are continually with you at Venice, in your room, from which I cannot withdraw them. H—— grieved me by saying that Elisabeth had expressed sorrow for a few words said in past days, and some little disputes between us of which I have truly lost all recollection. On my side, I have given you so much pain that I could not get over it if I was not certain that you forgive me. Thank God, we have been now living so long pleasantly together that our happiness was

complete, and hence the pain of separation very bitter. I have, at any rate, the satisfaction of feeling that I have made—for the love of Jesus dying on the cross—a real sacrifice; so great a one that I could never have measured it beforehand, much as I suffered in anticipation! But this is enough about myself.

“I should like to know all you are doing. Oncemore I implore you, dearest Elisabeth, to promise me that you will accept all the little pleasures that are offered to you. You must take the greatest care of your health, first for Tonnino’s sake, and then for mine. I do beg of you to do so. No, you will never know what my heart endured during that terrible morning, and how I felt as if it was breaking when I came out of your room. Well, it is God’s will. Let us ever love each other dearly

in Him. It is the only way of remaining united in absence. I love you, I dote upon you, I bless you, and with all my heart I embrace you both.

“Your affectionate Sister,

“NATALIE.”

“*Parma, December 20th, 1847.*

“MY DEAREST ELISABETH,

“I arrived last night at Parma, and you know what I found.* The grief is so deep and intense that it makes one forget oneself. The only thing that can never leave my mind is the thought of you both.

“In the midst of the general sorrow and the grief so peculiarly great to our friends, they have received us with open arms, and instantly sent for all our things

* The Archduchess Marie Louise, Duchess of Parma, had died the day before.

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from the hotel, insisting that we should sleep at the palace. They wanted us to stay till Christmas, but this would have been impossible in any case, and in the present position of the poor Bombelles, not considerate.

“ You could hardly conceive the affliction which is felt here. Poor Marie can hardly keep up. She exerts herself, but is quite exhausted* and overwhelmed with sorrow. The regrets of all this household are very touching. Marie will return to Venice immediately after her

* The amount of feeling and regret for this Princess seems almost surprising to those who have only known about her what history has recorded. It tends to prove that if, as is often said, people are seldom heroes to those who see them in every-day life, others, whose conduct in political affairs may have been judged severely, have sometimes qualities which endear them greatly to their friends, and make up for the public failings they are accused of.

father's departure. He has to accompany the Archduchess's remains to Vienna. What a sad duty! Marie will have at least the consolation of being with her aunt and you. She has promised me to take good care of you. I set off, dear Elisabeth, at ten o'clock this evening. Every day carries me away further from you, but my thoughts turn to Venice at every hour of the day and the night. I should always like to know what you are both doing. At night, in the *diligence*, I think of you, and if I feel the cold I rejoice that you are not exposed to it.

“Poor darling!—I hope so much that you go out, and that you are as well as when I left you. But I must start without hearing it, for I shall not receive a letter from you till Chambéry. Poor Marie! What a complete change it is, and how

sad it seems not to be able to be of any use to her. But it is impossible. I must go. I add this sacrifice to the others. I offer it to God, and so does she. Farewell; I kiss you both. Your shawl, your little rug, your furs, are very useful, for it is snowing and very cold.

“NATALIE.”

Natalie's short apparition at Parma was to Marie de Bombelles like a heavenly vision in that hour of sorrow. She wrote that her friend had no longer the look of one escaped from paradise, as had been said in former days, but seemed an angel in possession of heaven; she had broken the last chains that bound her to the world; she was on her way to the haven of peace; she was beaming with joy.

"Turin, Friday, Christmas Eve, 1847.

"MY BELOVED TONNINO AND ELISABETH,

"My days, my time, my life, are still entirely occupied with you. I can think of nothing else, and of my, as yet, unsatisfied longing for tidings of you. The snow has, alas! detained me here, and though I have the pleasure of spending these holy festivals with dear Maria Fassati,* who is an angel of goodness and kindness, and takes me everywhere, I cannot but feel intensely the loss of so many days during which I cannot hear from you. Oh! how I do long to know how you are and what you are doing. Our good God has required of me so great a sacrifice that I do not think He will increase it by allowing my dear Elisabeth to be ill. Moreover, I know, I feel that this sacrifice will be rewarded, and

* M. de Maistre's daughter.

greatly rewarded—I mean by the accomplishment of your wishes. I am sure our good God will grant it to my prayers.

“Just now A. Z. (her companion) almost made me burst into tears; but the fear of grieving her made me control my feelings. She had amused herself, thinking to please me, by arranging a sort of Christmas-tree, to which she had fastened a little parcel, and written upon it, ‘From Elisabeth.’

“Oh dear! I have often to rub my eyes in order to realize the fact that Elisabeth is not near me—that I am so far from her!

“To-morrow, when I receive Holy Communion, the Divine Infant Jesus will make me forget all else. He can do so, and as His goodness and mercy have never failed me, He will comfort me I know. I wonder if you were at Mass on St. Thomas’s day? During every hour of the day I

keep following in thought all the course of your daily life. Do tell me everything you do, even your little worldly concerns. We wondered whether you went on Wednesday to the assembly at the Palfis, and if your little Paolina had dressed you nicely. Write about all that interests you,—politics too. Is General Martini arrived? Has he been gracious to Tonnino? These excellent Thurns will have left nothing undone in that respect. Oh, how good they were to me! I shall never forget it. Tell them so, and that I shall always love them.”

“ Saturday morning.

“ A happy Christmas, my dear friends! I have been to Mass with the Duchess de Forli.* Mannina† had been dreadfully

* Sister of the Duchess de Serra-Capriola.

† Her daughter, the Countess of San Guliano.

ill ; but, thank God, she is better to-day. Yesterday I went to kiss her in her bed. She looked so pretty, so interesting ! She cried very much when she saw me. Poor Mannina !—God grant that she may recover, and that her child may be spared to her. I kiss you both with the tenderest love. Please be very merry on New Year's Day. I will pray for you on that day. Pray also for me and love me."

" Chambéry, Wednesday,

" December 29th, 1847.

"Thank God, my dear friends, I have—at last—received your letters ! Oh ! how long !—how interminably long—the time has seemed to me. It made me anxious and sad, though I felt that God, who is infinitely good, would be merciful and comfort me. And such dear, good letters they are ! God bless you for them !

I cannot pretend that they did not make me cry, for you will perhaps see when you read this letter, that I am crying even now ; but they have made me happy. And this morning at Mass I again offered up my sacrifice to God. I love to do so whatever pain or heart-aches I may feel. After all, it is so little when I look at the image of Christ crucified, and think of those words, 'He was offered because it was his own will.' *

“Thank you so much for your prayers, for I have great need of them, and I like to think that you help me in that way. I also say, measure my affection by your own, as you tell me to measure your regrets by those I feel myself. You will understand then how much I love you, and what I suffer.

* Isaiah liii. 8.

“Sachinka received me with open arms. She came into our room, at the hotel where the diligence had left us in the middle of the night, before we were hardly up ; and as the journey from here to Paris is too long to be accomplished before New Year’s Day, we have resolved to remain and spend it here. . . . Oh, my dear ones, try to spend that day as well and as happily as possible ! I feel so much all the kindness that people show you, and I hope that on that particular day they will flock to you and make much of you. I am longing, since yesterday, to find some opportunity to send you, dear Elisabeth, a pretty dress of Chambéry gauze. It will be admired at Venice as something new, and as in order to please me you mean to go out, I think you deserve a pretty gown. Do not be anxious about my little finances. I have more

money than I want for the journey, and as to the future you need have no fears. . . . I try by degrees to conquer my depression, but I do not yet succeed very well. God can make me smile sometimes; but not distractions, not my friends—oh no, believe me, none of them—can change or even diminish the strength of my feelings. . . . Our journey, thank God, has been very successful. We did not suffer at all, even in crossing the Mont Cenis. I felt sure it would be so, knowing the prayers which were made for us. . . . Let us pray and hope a great deal! I never had expected that the effort of leaving you would have been so great. But I bless God that He has helped me to make it, though as yet only materially, for I have to renew every day and almost every moment the acquiescence of my will. . . . Do not say that it is those

who remain in the same place, surrounded by remembrances of the past, who suffer the most, whilst those who travel have distractions. Think rather, that every step which carries one further is a new thorn to a wounded heart. I assure you, that much as you speak of your regrets, mine are still greater, and make me suffer as I never in my life had suffered before. I often bitterly reproach myself for my want of courage, but God pities it I am sure.

“Now in answer to your questions: No, I have not left behind anything I wanted to bring away except the little picture of St. Teresa, which I had not room for. If the G——’s will take charge of it I shall be very glad to have it. As to the books that are in the *Prie Dieu*, I thought Stephanie would like them. But all those on the little shelves, or in my room, or in the drawers,

I left at your disposal. There is also some linen in the drawers. It pleased me to think that Elisabeth cared to keep my little cushion, and it made me regret that I had not left her some of the things I was in the habit of using, but all I had of that sort seemed too ugly to give her. Did she find in one of the drawers a sachet containing some small embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs that I was very fond of? They might indeed be of some little use to her."

"Chambéry, January 2nd, 1848.

"We set off to-night at seven o'clock, well in health, and, physically speaking, in excellent condition; but the heart still suffers from our separation, though not from the sacrifice of itself which is still to come. The truth is, my dear friends, that I did not know that I loved you as much as I

find I do. No; I was not aware of the strength of my affection, and I thank God that He did not let me fully know it beforehand. I should have shrunk perhaps from the trial, and then have greatly repented of it afterwards. Now this suffering gives some price to the sacrifice, and does not certainly diminish its merit. I bless God for it all.

“I hope that you went to the ‘Te Deum’ at St. Mark’s on the 31st of December. In the course of a year so many blessings and graces have been received, and even if we do not quite see this, we have at any rate to thank God for the innumerable miseries we have been spared. In any case, it is always essential to end the year in that way. Here I have every day received for you the blessing of Benediction, and offered up also for you my Communions. Oh! I wish you so much to be happy.

“My dear Tonniño promised me that he would call on the patriarch. It would give so much pleasure if he would do so. Tell him, my dear friend, that I recommend myself to his prayers, and that on my side I will always pray for him, for his clergy, and for his flock. I do love my dear Venice so much ! I feel as if I had never loved it so much before ; I think of it incessantly, and always feel prompted to pray for all its needs. Tell the good patriarch also that I kiss his hand, and that I beg him to give me his paternal blessing.

“Farewell, my beloved ones—my heart embraces you both most tenderly. Love me, and may God bless you.

“NATALIE.”



CHAPTER XI.

1848.

NATALIE'S journey from Venice to Paris seems like a crossing from one shore to another, during which she felt the last motions of the waves of the world.

We cannot but admire, in these simple, sincere, and touching letters, the humble care with which she keeps in the background the supernatural and heroic side of the line she is taking, and only speaks of her love, her regrets, and her tender anxiety for all that relates to her sister. We see in this that spirit of charity which

was about to rule her entirely, and which alone has the power of destroying the least element of selfishness. But in spite of all the natural affection she evinces up to the last moment, we do not find the least trace in her of even an instant's resistance to grace. The nearer she approaches to the end, the more we can discern that everything appears easier to her soul, and that a great and deep joy succeeds this hard trial, and crowns her struggles.

When she arrived in Paris on the 8th of January, 1848, she did not know how long she would have to wait for her brother's final consent, and had still some fears that he would endeavour to prolong the period of her probation. M. Narischkin's honesty of purpose and true affection for his sister, led him to have only one

solicitude on the subject, and that was the solid nature of her reasons for taking so important a step. He had several conversations on that point with M. Aladel, and felt, in consequence, so much confidence and respect for the holy missionary, that he ceased to offer any opposition to the realization of his sister's wishes, and she was able to seek—without restraint—the advice which seemed to her necessary and useful, and to fix exactly in the way she wished the day and hour of their separation.

It may seem strange that M. Aladel's advice did not suffice to determine her as to her vocation, but in spite of a deep and increasing veneration for him, she felt it necessary to consult those whom she called her first fathers; and at Paris, as at Venice, it was to the wisdom and experi-

ence of the Jesuit fathers that she had recourse.

Some of our readers are perhaps not aware that St. Vincent of Paul established it, as a rule, that the Sisters of Charity should not choose as their confessors the priests of the Society of Jesus. His object was to maintain amongst them a rigorous simplicity of thought, language, and manners becoming obscure servants of the poor, but not consonant with the vocation of the illustrious society devoted to the work of education, and to an Apostolate in the midst of the world. The direction of the Sisters of Charity was assigned to the Lazarist Missionaries, who had been founded with an analogous object and in the same spirit, and in case they had not any of these religious in their vicinity, the holy founder desired them to

go to confession to the priests of their parish.

We can easily fancy how people possessed with a rabid spirit of injustice towards the Jesuits—a spirit which sometimes obscures the judgment of otherwise sensible persons—might smile at the bare idea that a gifted and high-born lady, who consulted them as to the choice of her vocation, would be advised to fix upon the order most withdrawn from their own influence. This was, however, the case with Natalie and many others. It was the sons of St. Ignatius who led her to the feet of St. Vincent of Paul; and in the absence of Father de Ravignan, who was then at Rome, Father Lefèbre decided her final choice of the Order which Father Ferrari and Father Curci, at Venice, had recommended her to enter, and to which she

now irrevocably devoted herself for the rest of her life.

Natalie was twenty-eight when she came to this momentous decision. Even those who are not called to the religious life, and who feel themselves incapable and unworthy of so high a privilege, can appreciate the wonderful blessing of such a vocation. They can understand how it throws open the way, so to speak, to a nearer approach to God, and that if it deprives the soul of some of the joys of this world, it delivers it from those sufferings which those joys entail, and especially of those which touch the heart. For, after all, are we not always obliged to control our feelings? and does not life often, and death inevitably, dissever the closest ties?

Oh! we may well envy those who, of their own accord, break these chains. Do

not let us be so foolish as to pity them, but on the contrary, learn and understand the great lessons they teach us.

It was on the 21st of January, 1848, that Natalie left, for ever, her brother's house. She went that day to the Hospital de la Rochefoucauld, at Montrouge, where she was to make a first trial of the life to which she aspired, and thus prepare, by a short postulancy of two months, for her noviciate.

At the moment that Natalie Narischkin was thus leaving the world, Alexandrine de la Ferronnays, worn out by her toils in the cause of charity, was about to die. At that time—so solemn a one for both of these devoted souls—they met again, and the new servant of the poor, wearing her habit, knelt by the bedside of her dying friend. This meeting—almost as affecting as

that of Natalie and Olga at Brussels, in 1843—was brightened by the light that played on both their opening paths. The words they spoke were full of hope and joy. Before going to meet Olga in heaven, Alexandrine's eyes had seen, in her last hours, the complete answer to the prayer which had been on her young sister's lips as she quitted this world. Two days afterwards she died, and entered on that blissful eternity of which she had enjoyed a foretaste on earth, after making a full surrender of every earthly happiness.

On the day after her death, Natalie came to kneel by her side. This was on the 10th of February, the anniversary of the one on which five years before, at Brussels, she had seen Olga lying on her death-bed, and prayed during those long

hours, the memory of which she ever retained!

That eventful date, which thus twice had marked in Natalie's life epochs of special trial and prayer, was destined to be the epoch of another sad bereavement. Whilst Alexandrine was expiring under her eyes, her sister Marie (Madame de Valois) was dying, at a distance, of an illness which had long threatened her life. In the first days of her separation from her family, Natalie underwent the most trying consequence of her vocation,—the absence from her beloved relatives at a time when her tender care would have been so much valued. But though still called upon to suffer—and it is not in order to escape suffering that a soul devotes itself to Jesus Christ—she was delivered from all the agitations arising from impatience, discontent,

and resistance to God. Though only just entering on the path to perfection which she was to follow to the end, her heart had found peace even on the threshold of that holy abode where she had sought God and the poor.

Her letters from Montrouge bear the blessed impress of that Divine peace, at the same time that they express her unalterable affection for those dear ones whom, for God's sake, she had left, and whom He permitted her to love as fondly as ever. It was during her residence at Montrouge that happened the great events which convulsed France and Europe, in February, 1848. She seems scarcely to have been conscious of these public agitations. If she alludes to them it is with the feeling of one who, sheltered in a safe haven, hears the storm raging at a distance. In the

preceding pages we have a little anticipated the course of events to which the following letters refer :

*“ Montrouge, Hospice de la Rochefoucauld,
“ 29th of January, 1848.*

“ MY DEAR FRIENDS,

“ I have been now a week in this place, where it is God’s will I should serve Him, in the person of His poor. Please do not grieve over me. I am not dead—oh, no ! on the contrary, I am very happy. His Voice had been so long calling me that I feel as if I must have stopped my ears not to hear it. Such weak creatures as myself are of very little value, I assure you ; but He evidently wants by degrees to detach me from everything, and to give my heart, once for all, where He, our only and real treasure, abides. . . .

“ I am a postulant at the Hospice de la

Rochefoucauld, near the *barrière* of Montrouge. It is at about twenty minutes' distance from the Mother-house, where I shall not go till I begin my noviciate, which will be about the middle of May. But before Alexander leaves Paris, I shall have taken the habit of a novice. Now I wear a black gown, a white apron, a large rosary on the left side, and a little black cap. Four o'clock is the hour for rising, and nine for going to bed; but though I am in excellent health I am taken great care of, and not yet allowed to do like the others. I have a great many occupations, so you must expect fewer letters from me, as I have to divide amongst many the time I have for writing. You may tell A. Z. that she may indeed, if she likes, fancy me by the bedside of the good little old women whom we have to nurse,

to dress, to feed, and to take care of; and very sweet it is to be thus employed, when we remember that it is God we thus serve, and for His sake that we do it. It is not difficult to keep this thought in mind, when from morning to night one is surrounded with such perfect examples of obedience and abnegation. There are really some of our sisters—I might perhaps say all, but I speak of those whom I see here every day—who surprise and edify me from morning to night. I think that the most ill-natured person, and the most anxious to discover faults in them, would not be able to detect in their lives anything contrary to virtue. What God requires of me will be in proportion to the examples He has set before me. Now, as you wish to know it, this is the employment of my happy day:

“Hitherto, I have got up at five. They have not allowed me yet to rise at four. We dress quickly, and go down first to the little chapel in the house, where we stay till a quarter past six, and then go to the refectory for breakfast. Afterwards we hear Mass, and afterwards I go to the wards of the good old women, where I am employed till eleven, at which hour we dine. Grace in the chapel, and some other spiritual duties, take up the time till half-past twelve. Afterwards we sit together and work till two in the community-room. When the clock strikes two spiritual reading begins, followed by the recitation of the rosary. At three I go and help a little in the linen-room, and then I go back to the old women, feeding them, and putting them to bed. A sister reads prayers morning and evening in the infirmary. It

is a touching sight, and everything here gives one holy feelings; my only fear is not to profit enough of these graces. At six o'clock we sup, from seven to eight we sit again in the community-room, then we go to the little chapel, and at nine o'clock everybody is in bed. On Sundays and Holydays we have music at Mass and Benediction. Every Thursday, and also on all the first Fridays of the month, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Nothing is wanting to my happiness, beginning by the incomparable joy of living in the house of our Lord.

“Tell everybody that I cannot write much, but that in my heart there is room for all those I love, and that in my prayers none of them are forgotten. Tell Father Montellé too that I shall always remember him, and that I reckon on his prayers.”

Some days afterwards she writes:

“You will have heard of the death of our saintly Alexandrine de la Ferronnays. I need not say that her death was like her life,—pure, holy, and edifying. She expressed in her last moments the most ardent desire to see God. The last words she said to me when she could hardly speak were, ‘Happy girl.’ Oh yes, happy!—a thousand and a thousand times happy—I can never weary of repeating it!

In her dying hours, Alexandrine spoke to her friends of nothing but the happiness of leaving this world. The only one whom she seemed to think happy in remaining on earth was her who was forsaking all worldly joys for God alone.

The following letter is dated February 11th. She had just been praying by Alexandrine’s death-bed, and

had just heard of her own sister's decease :

“MY BELOVED ELISABETH,

“Though I wrote to you a long letter only a few days ago, my good Superior gives me leave to write again in order to console you, and to beseech you in the name of that faith which leads you to say, ‘God’s will be done,’ not to give way too much to grief, hard as is this trial. I ask it for the sake of your good husband, and also a little for my own sake, for I can think of nothing but your sorrowing heart. Thank God, dear Marie was quite resigned, and ready to make to Him the sacrifice of her happiness and her life. I was to the greatest degree comforted by all that A. Z. wrote to me on that subject. We may hope that she has found favour with God, and that she is now bless-

ing us and praying for us. Enlarge your own heart, dearest, as much as possible, and tell God that you love Him ; and out of love for that merciful Saviour who has given you such a happy lot, accept this sacrifice, and unite it and offer it up with the great Sacrifice made for us on Calvary. Then try to be calm and do nothing to keep up your grief. In your case it would be a great imprudence, but it is always displeasing to God. Courage, then, and peace and quietness !—once more I ask it in the name of all that I have already urged. As to the other subjects which make you anxious, trust me all will go on well. My postulancy has not produced any change. I can act just the same about all that concerns your interests, and you may be certain that I shall do everything necessary. Oh, dear Elisabeth, if I could only describe to

you the happiness and the peace I feel every day more! God is too good to me! We must love Him, and try to get others to love Him too, and to know Him better. Seek Him, dearest, and you will soon feel the same."

"Yesterday, the 10th of February, was the anniversary of Olga's death, and I was praying by the side of our dear Alexandrine, who died on Wednesday between eight and nine o'clock. They were all there except poor Pauline, who is far away at this moment—a sad thing for her and for all of them. The coincidence of their sorrow with ours made us mingle our tears, and pray for one another. Madame de la Ferronnays is so holy, and Albertine * is as pious and fervent as her mother. This is indeed necessary in order to arrive at that

* Olga's youngest sister, now Vicomtesse de la Panouse.

perfect detachment which unites our will entirely with God's will, and makes us love it above all things. This is not the work of a day; but do not be discouraged, by degrees it will come.

"I tenderly kiss you both. Ask Father Montellé from me to come and comfort you. Farewell, my beloved ones. I love you, and I bless you. Love me also, and be satisfied about me, for indeed I am happy.

"NATALIE."

Three weeks afterwards she wrote again to her sister :

"*March 1st, 1848.*

"My poor dear, beloved Elisabeth,—I received your little letter yesterday, that sad but dear little letter which I had so impatiently expected. I thank God for what it contained. Our good Thérèse had

already given me comforting news of you. She is indeed one of those who understands the griefs of others. She had guessed my feelings, and her affectionate and pitying heart hastened to soothe my affliction. I am deeply grateful to her. My thoughts cannot leave you for a moment, and I now doubly rejoice that Catherine will soon be with you. I like to feel that you will be in the same place.

“Here the most terrible events have brought about, in three days, the end of a reign and the fall of a dynasty, as well as that of the monarchy. Peace prevails, but under a Republic. If Alexander leaves Paris, I suppose he will, in any case, meet A. Z., so I will give him the things I want to send you: your shawl, your black book—which I should not be allowed to keep—and some other little things I

brought with me as a postulant. They are small matters, but the last I shall have to part with. If everything goes on quietly it is not impossible that Alexander may go to Venice. Oh, how I long to hear of the general pacification of Italy; and that Catherine is with you! When the first emotion of meeting again is over, you will begin a quiet, nice, regular life, like ours when I was with you. The little rooms will again be inhabited, and this new existence will seem the continuation of the one we led together for two years. With regard to myself, dear Elisabeth and dear Tonnino, do not think that the religious life can ever change my affection for you. I assure you that it is quite the contrary; for, as I was saying the other day to Catherine—in the silence of a quiet, retired life, and in the midst of continual work for the poor, or even more common-place

occupations, the heart expands in God's house. You see the happiness of being at every moment in His sacred presence, and close to the Tabernacle! My constant, my daily prayer is for you. I may even say—for it is the truth—that you have not only a share in all my prayers, but in my whole life; for in each one of my actions—if, for instance, I feel a little tired or a little lazy—I think of you; and as our good God accepts everything we offer to Him, I then hasten to make for you the little effort called for, and that immediately rouses me to exertion. Parting with you made a wound in my heart too deep to be ever closed. It does not bleed now, because I am happy to have gone through that and every other suffering for God's sake. It has ceased to be painful, but it can never be effaced. You need not, then, my dear Elisabeth, think I can ever forget you.

Tell me of everything you do, speak to me of all that interests you, be it sad or pleasant, be it pleasure or sorrow. Be quite certain that you will always find my heart ready to share, and as far as my power goes, to soothe, all your cares, and enter into all your feelings—if in no other way, by an increased fervour in my prayers for you. Give Catherine a most tender kiss from me when she arrives. Give me every little detail of those first moments, and how you have arranged for her my dear little room and my oratory. May you be happy, my beloved friends—may God bless you and bestow on you His highest graces. My best love to all our friends. I love them all.

“NATALIE.”

The following letter, dated March 16th, 1848, is addressed to a friend almost as

dear as a sister, and to whom she could speak with still more freedom :

“ You are quite right to complain of me, my very dear and good friend, for it is indeed a long time since I have written to you. But in order to forgive me, remember that as far back as seven weeks ago I consecrated to God, amongst other things, my *liberty*. Oh ! it is so sweet to utter that word,—that word which makes one the happy slave of a Master whose yoke is happier and sweeter than the highest enjoyments of this world.

“ You asked me, in one of your last letters, what had brought about the changes which have led me here. I think the first thing which made me think of it was the history of the sons of St. Ignatius. Their ‘ *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* ’ became from that moment my own motto, and I hope it

will remain such to my dying breath. As to the choice of the means to that end, my definitive engagement under the banner of St. Vincent of Paul, it was fully approved by Father Léfèbre (Father de Ravignan was at Rome). His opinion confirmed entirely the advice I had received at Venice; that of Father Minini, whom I made acquaintance with at Turin, and Father Peschard, whom I saw at Chambéry. As to my weakness and my sufferings at the terrible moment of separation, I will not dwell upon it; I felt as if I was breaking Elisabeth's heart, and my own yet more.

“But what do we know of the thousand ways God makes use of to promote the good of our souls and the glory of His name? She wrote to me afterwards letters which touched me deeply, and which showed how well she understood the wish to suffer for

His sake who has suffered for us, and to make sacrifices for Him!—and she told me to pray that she might have the love which makes crosses easy and light, and even enables us to bear them with joy. And indeed she has borne the great sorrow which has fallen upon us since with more calmness and resignation than I could ever have ventured to expect. . . . Poor dear Elisabeth! After having granted her so much happiness, God is now making her ascend to Calvary. Catherine must be with her by this time. I long to hear of them together, for I assure you that if I have a single earthly care still at heart, it is for their happiness, and I should always want to be assured of it. As for you, I know where I can find you every day, and I do not forget it.

“Oh! how well it is to feel that heart and thoughts are there where our real

treasure is, and that thus we never lose sight of each other! . . . Thank the good fathers for their messages, and tell them that my heart will never forget them before God. Indeed I feel a real consolation in thinking of each and all of them in that way. My own dear father, you know, loved and appreciated that holy Society 'which bears no earthly name,' and it never will be said that one of his daughters has been unfaithful to St. Ignatius.

"The community will attend to your commissions, and one of these days our good Superior at the hospital will send me to hear Mass and receive Holy Communion, for your intention, at Nôtre Dame des Victoires. But political events have interfered as yet with this little plan formed so long ago. You can understand that they did not like to let us walk in the streets

without absolute necessity at such a time as this; though hitherto religious communities have not suffered any risk. Oh, let us pray!—constantly pray—for that general peace which would bring back all hearts to the love of God. I shall try to write to you once more before the end of my postulancy, for when I shall have entered the seminary there will be an end of letters for the rest of the year. During that time we can write only to our relatives, and even to them not very often. This is a little sacrifice that our good God will accept if we know how to offer it up in the right way. Well, my dear, darling little Sache, I must leave you! Do not forget to thank God for me, and to pray for my sisters. You may rely on my associating you with all my actions, prayers, and sufferings, and all the good works of our community.

“It will be easy for you in a great measure to know what is our rule of life, as there are Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul at Naples, and all our houses follow the same rule with the most exact fidelity.

“Farewell; I affectionately embrace you. A thousand loves to Mita and the Serra-Capriolas. My respectful remembrances to your dear parents. Pray for your loving sister. NATALIE.”

To the same friend she wrote on the 22nd of March, 1848:

“I hasten to tell you that your commission is done, and that the parcel will be sent to Marseilles to-morrow. I have added to it a little picture of the altar where I prayed and went to Communion for you this morning. As our Superiors have kindly decided that I can be admitted into the seminary on the eve of the Annunciation, I write to bid you a little

formal farewell, which means that my pen takes leave of you for a time, the novices not being allowed to write during a year except to their nearest relatives, and once to their confessor. So you will not now hear from me for a year. But be sure that my heart will never, never forget you. . . . Pray for me, as I shall pray for you ; pray that God may give me grace truly to profit of that happy time which I look upon as a prelude to paradise. It is said by all those who have gone through it, that it is like entering a sanctuary from which all cares and all anxieties are banished. Everything exterior seems to be husked and kept aloof. It is a time of grace and perfect earthly happiness, and often that of our whole eternity results from it. How important it must be then not to lose any particle of its graces.

“ Oh, yes, my dear little sister, Marie’s death was a great grief to me ; but never

more than at that moment, and during the days which preceded it, did I feel all the happiness of being here, where I could offer a great deal, and everything for her.. Think also of my dear sisters at Venice ; I do so incessantly ; and let us pray also for all the needs of poor Europe. I kiss you most affectionately, and I remain closely united to you in the Heart of our adorable Lord and Master.

“ Remember me most kindly and respectfully to your father and mother, and also to Father Latini and Father Curci. I leave it to you to explain to everybody that I cannot write at present to any one. A thousand loves to Mita Gargallo, and to the Serra-Capriolas, and tell them all that *I am happy.*”

END OF VOL. I.

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Natalie Narischkin : Sister of Charity o



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